

CHINA AND ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION



JOHN B. COBB, JR.
in conversation with
ANDRE VLTCHek

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Badak Merah Semesta

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Preface

There is no time for long introductions. The world is, possibly heading for yet another catastrophe. This one, if we, human beings do not manage to prevent it, could become our final one.

The West is flexing its muscles, antagonizing every single country that stands in its way to the total domination of the planet. Some countries, including Syria, are attacked directly and mercilessly. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people are dying.

The political and potentially military disaster is simultaneously ‘complemented’ by the ecological ruin. Mainly Western multi-national companies have been plundering the world, putting profit over people, even over the very survival of the human species.

‘Political correctness’ is diluting the sense of urgency, and there is plenty of hypocrisy at work: while, at least in the West and Japan, people are encouraged to recycle, to turn off the lights in empty rooms and not to waste water, in other parts of our planet, entire islands, nations and continents are being logged out by the Western corporations or destroyed by unbridled mining. The governments of the West’s ‘client states’ are getting hopelessly corrupt in the process.

I am filming in Indonesia, where all red lines have already been crossed: there is an ongoing genocide in West Papua, to give way to unbridled business interests. The army, police and paramilitaries are deployed to protect foreign and Indonesian corporations, and kill indiscriminately local people, if they stand in the way. The third biggest island on earth – Borneo (in Indonesia known as Kalimantan) – has been irreversibly ruined by

logging, mining and palm oil plantations. Its rivers have been poisoned by mercury, because of official ‘illegal’ gold mining.

Brazil has just elected the militant right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro, who is, most likely, going to bring unprecedented devastation to his country’s rainforest and to the environment in general.

Western politicians see absolutely no urgency in all that is taking place around the world, or more precisely – they are remunerated not to see it.

So, are we now dealing with a thoroughly hopeless scenario? Has the world gone mad? Is it ready to get sacrificed for the profit of the very few? Entire island-nations in South Pacific are being devastated by tidal waves, as I described in my book *Oceania* . Many low-lying coastal areas of predominantly poor countries are suffering from devastating floods. There is scarcity of water, food, of many basic resources. Something has essentially gone wrong. The political and economic system which only serves the few rich nations and their companies is obviously impoverishing and destroying the great majority of humans on this planet. Are people simply going to stand passively, watching what is happening around them, and die, as their world literally goes up in flames or sinking to the bottom of the ocean ?

It appeared so, until a few months ago.



Then, one of the oldest cultures of earth, China, stood up and said “No! There are different ways to go forward. We could all benefit from the progress, without cannibalizing, and fully destroying our Planet.”

China, which is led by President Xi Jinping, accelerated the implementation of the concept of so-called Ecological Civilization, eventually engraving it into the constitution of the country.

A man who has been doing tremendous work in China, working tirelessly on the *Ecological Civilization* concept in both China and in the United States, John Cobb Jr., has been, for years, a friend and close comrade of mine.

A 93-year-old Whiteheadian philosopher (and many believe, one of the most important living philosophers residing in the West), one of the most acknowledged Christian progressive theologians, and self-proclaimed

‘supporter of Revolution’, John Cobb is a brave rebellious and optimistic voice coming from the United States.

We first met on a bus from Pyongyang to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), in North Korea (DPRK), several years ago, and became close friends, now working on several books and films together.

We do not always agree on every issue or detail (after all, I am an atheist, while John is a theologian), but most of the time we are firmly on the ‘same side of the barricade’. And we are both passionate about our humble but determined efforts to save this scarred but beautiful planet of ours. We just refuse to ‘shut up’, to give up and abandon the struggle for the survival of this world.

I am convinced that in this difficult, extremely dangerous, but also somehow intoxicatingly hopeful time for mankind (whenever there is struggle, there can be victory), it is clear that John Cobb’s voice should be heard by many.

~ Andre Vltchek

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Long-distance Conversation, 2018

CHINA'S GROWING COMMITMENT TO ECO-CIV

I recalled our meeting in Claremont, when John expressed worries that China and its leadership could go ‘either way’, in regard to the “Ecological Civilization”, possibly even against it. Inside China and her leadership, there were apparently voices defending a ‘pure economic growth’ approach.

Now, in 2018, the Chinese Parliament has written the goal of ecological civilization into the national constitution.

I wanted to know what this meant, practically? Is there a reason to celebrate?

John replied:

“ In 2012, the Chinese Communist Party wrote the goal of an ecological civilization into its constitution. Although the formulation is remarkable, the motivation is not hard to understand. The Party was responding to the distress of hundreds of millions of Chinese who longed for clean air and blue skies. To maintain the popularity of the Party, it had to assure the people that it shared their concerns. Everyone agreed that lessening pollution was a good thing.

Nevertheless, the phrase meant more than just trying to minimize the ecological damage done by rapid economic growth. It expressed an understanding that the natural world was constituted of ecologies rather than just a collection of individual things. And it clearly indicated the

desirability of human activity fitting into this natural world rather than replacing it.

Many who supported this goal, however, did not suppose that announcing it committed China to major changes in the present. Many have argued that China's first task was to modernize, meaning especially industrialize, and become a wealthy nation. Then it would have the luxury of attending to the natural environment. Few, if any, thought it meant that China would turn away from the goal of economic growth to pursue something different.

However, Chinese leaders did recognize that simply postponing the work for clear skies and a healthy environment would not work. The nation needed to work on economic growth and a healthy natural environment simultaneously. It began evaluating the success of provincial governments by their achievements in these two distinct realms. Growth goals were set below what would be possible, so that it could be channeled in less environmentally harmful directions. Experiments with eco-villages received encouragement.

The talk of moving toward an ecological civilization also encouraged reflection about "civilization" alongside "market." That supported those Chinese who were concerned that the narrow concern for wealth at all costs was not healthy for human society. Marxism had always emphasized economic matters, but it was concerned to move society away from competition toward cooperation. It was always concerned with the distribution of goods, so that the poor would be benefited, and workers would be empowered. The idea of recovering traditional Chinese civilizational values gained in acceptance.

The extent to which the health of the natural environment and cultural goals gained status as policy goals bothered some Party members. For them China's wealth and power were crucial. An observer could not be sure that the extent to which the goal of ecological civilization was broadening the aims of government would continue. Leadership is subject to change every five years.

However, the changes at the recent Party Congress (2018) tended to strengthen commitment to ecological civilization. President Xi, who has been central to the moves toward ecological civilization, was given another five years. He and others reiterated the goal and affirmed steps in its direction. Now it seems likely that in the next five years he will not be a "lame-duck" president since the limitation to two terms has been removed.

To reinforce the Chinese commitment, the Parliament has written the goal of ecological civilization into the national constitution. Since the national government is regularly guided by the Party, this may not seem to make much practical difference. But the way it occurred does make clear that the nation, on the whole, is not resentful. The Chinese people do not feel that the Party's commitment is oppressive or foolish. We can have considerable confidence that China as a nation is genuinely committed and that the people share a hope for becoming an ecological civilization. Predicting the future is never safe, but as these matters go, we can have confidence that China is committed. Given the likelihood that it will supersede the United States as the global leader, this can give us grounds for hope."

JOHN COBB'S ROLE IN CHINA

John Cobb is a well-known figure in the PRC. His thoughts are having a great impact on an influential group of Chinese leaders. But how would he, personally, summarize his involvement in the "Ecological Civilization" project? What impact did he have, personally, on what is happening in China, in this particular field, so essential for survival and healing of our planet?

"Through most of my life, the last thing I anticipated was to have a role in China. As a Protestant theologian, any hope for influence went in quite different directions. Although my theology is deeply shaped by the prophetic tradition of ancient Judaism, and I understand Marx also to have been deeply informed by that tradition, I did not expect Chinese Communists to recognize that kinship. Yet in the end, I consider that, through a remarkable sequence of chances, my role in China has been the most important part of my life. I will first describe my trajectory, then the trajectory of China, and then the wholly "improbable" intersection.

In my studies at the University of Chicago in the late nineteen forties, made possible by the GI bill, I was introduced to Alfred North Whitehead. Over the years, I was more and more impressed by the way his "philosophy of organism" answered my questions and provided me the holistic vision

that I craved, one quite contrary to the mechanist and materialist thinking that dominated American education and culture .

In the late sixties, I was awakened to the fact that the dominant modern culture was leading the world to self-destruction, and my attachment to Whitehead, as one who offered a far more promising alternative, was confirmed and deepened. Meanwhile interest in any alternative to mechanism was fading in American universities. Together with David Griffin, I seized an opportunity in 1973 to create a center to keep Whitehead's thought alive and display its relevance to the crises of our time. This Center for Process Studies has sponsored conferences and lectures and publications displaying how Whitehead's organic and processive thought provides a more promising pattern of thinking in many fields. Ecological concerns played a large role throughout. Although many individual scientists and professionals worked with us, the universities tightened their commitment to the modern vision we were trying to get beyond. We sometimes called ourselves postmodernists, but when that term was given wide currency by French intellectual deconstruction of modernity, David Griffin began calling us "constructive post-modernists. "

By the opening of the twentieth century, thoughtful Chinese saw that the Western colonial powers together with Japan were nibbling away at China and that classical Chinese culture was unable to compete with the West in science, technology, and military power. To maintain Chinese independence, China must modernize. It adopted the dominant Western form of modernity, bourgeois capitalism. The suffering of the poor led many to seek a better form of modernity in Marxism, and during and after World War II the Marxists replaced bourgeois democracy with rule by the Communist Party.

Mao Tse Tung made a serious effort to end China's class society in what is called then "Cultural Revolution." This evoked so intense an opposition from the urban middle class, that it was a painful failure, never repeated. When the Communist Party repudiated this Marxist goal, what was left was rule by the Party and commitment to rapid modernization as the road to national wealth.

Chinese intellectuals were not comfortable with this total commitment to the modern in view of the deconstruction of the modern by French intellectuals. Some of them followed the French in calling themselves postmodernists, but the French postmodernists gave little guidance in

relation to China's biggest problem with modernization — the pollution and degradation of the environment. When they discovered that there was another form of "postmodernism" that made positive proposals for change and gave a great deal of attention to the natural world, many of them were interested. One Chinese postmodern thinker, Zhihe Wang, came to Claremont to complete his studies, and it was his leadership that led to the intersection of developments in China with my life. He decided that he could be most effective living in the United States and frequently visiting China. His wife, Meijun Fan left a prestigious professorship at the Beijing Normal University to work with him. As a result of their effective introduction of "process thought" to China, thirty-five universities established centers focusing on the relevance of Whitehead's thought to a wide range of topics, such as education, psychology, science and values, the legal system, and so forth .

Meanwhile, partly, I assume, to assuage the distress of many urbanites with the pollution of the air, the Communist Party wrote into its constitution the goal of becoming an "ecological civilization." Because of the reputation of the Chinese leadership in Claremont, they were encouraged to hold conferences on this topic here, primarily for Chinese scholars and government officials. The first Claremont International Forum on Ecological Civilization was held in 2006. Thus far 12 forums were held. These forums gave me and other American constructive postmodernists an opportunity to participate in shaping the meaning of the initially rich and suggestive, but rather vague, term. This has probably been our major contribution.

There has been one very important shift in Chinese policy due to the commitment to "ecological civilization." As part of its goal of modernization, China planned to industrialize agriculture. At many of the conferences here and at others in China, we argued that China could not build an ecological civilization on an industrial agriculture. The Communist Party was persuaded to shift its policies from the continuing depopulation of rural China to the development of the thousands of villages that were slated for destruction. Policies have changed, and in 2016 for the first time, more people moved from cities to countryside than from countryside to cities. Development of villages has been emphasized along with the goal of ecological civilization in last fall's crucial meetings of the Communist Party. And the Chinese parliament has written the goal of

ecological civilization into the national constitution. It seems highly probable that this important shift in Chinese society will endure.

Obviously, the shift was primarily due to the work of many Chinese. However, harsh criticism by Americans of the consequences of industrializing agriculture in the United States played a role. Again, my voice was only one of many. Partly, no doubt, because of my age, I am given far more credit than I deserve. But I am very proud of whatever contribution I made to this shift that affects hundreds of millions of Chinese and gives some concrete meaning to “ecological civilization” .

CENTRALIZED POWER

In many ways, China became the world leader, when it comes to environmentalism, as well as combining traditional culture with modernity. It appears that it is determined to build the entire civilization around its ecological and cultural concerns. Perhaps in the future, the economic and financial considerations may still play to some extent important, but secondary roles. Is it mainly possible because of the centralized/Communist nature of the Chinese political and economic system (including the central planning)?

“I have neither study nor experience qualifying me to address this question. But I still have opinions; so, I’ll share them.

Clearly in China it has been the leadership of the central government that has set the course, done the planning, and implemented what it planned. For those of us who believe the world needs urgently to move toward ecological civilization, this has worked well. Prior to the meetings last fall, I remained unsure about whether everything depended on a particular leader who might be replaced. That he emerged from the fall events with increased power was reassuring, especially because he strongly expressed determination to implement steps toward achieving the civilization China and the world needs.

There was still the possibility that representatives of other factions in the Communist Party, who sought to replace Xi, might treat him as a “lame duck.” Now that the impossibility of a third term has been removed, that danger also is gone. An extended period of leadership can probably make

some policies so identified with the nation that they will continue even if a successor is not personally committed to the goal of ecological civilization.

All of this is to say that centralized power is currently working in a remarkably promising way not paralleled by other countries with less centralized political power.

Some European countries achieved a considerable move toward ecological civilization earlier than China. That they are not currently leading may be because they are already farther along on the needed trajectory. They have made significant desirable policy changes without centralized power. In these countries, the public as a whole is well informed and capable of making wise decisions. Governments are sufficiently democratic that they express the public desires. In some cases, commitment to sustainable practices and meeting the basic needs of all citizens has become the “common sense” of the people sufficiently that it is likely not to be radically abandoned by changing officials. It was impressive that, when Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris Accords, there was very little interest in withdrawal in Europe, even though the reasons for withdrawal applied equally there. Apparently, the corporate world in Europe has adjusted to new needs and expectations, as it has not in the United States.



John B. Cobb, Jr. and Mr. Chunyun Jiang, vice Premier of China, a member of the Communist Party's Politburo in Beijing. (Photo by Zhihe Wang)

Even so, I have more confidence in endurance in China with its centralized control than in European countries more directly subject to popular opinion. Thus far European countries have been fairly prosperous. Pollution control has not led to unemployment or economic immiseration. Thus, the level of commitment to ecological needs has not been seriously tested.

In contrast, the need to accept large numbers of refugees has been sufficient to weaken consensus on a range of issues. It is not hard to imagine that corporations that have thus far been cooperative with good policies might take advantage of dissident public opinion to seek the kinds of changes that the United States is currently experiencing. These corporations often control the media and thus can shape public opinion to support their ends.

As I compare China's success in giving serious attention to the well-being of its natural environment and needy citizens with that of European countries, my reason for betting on China is that I have some confidence that it will maintain governmental control of finance and of corporations generally. If it does this, it can also control the media. Thus, it has a chance of making financial and industrial corporations serve the national good as perceived by people not in their service. Less centralized governments are less able to control the financial and other corporations whose short-term interests may conflict with the common good.

Of course, the concentration of power in countries like China does not guarantee the continuation of governmental service of the common good. There is an old adage in the West: power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. I think the Communist Party in China works hard to socialize its members to resist corruption. I think it has been largely successful. My hero, Jesus, asserted that no one can serve God and money. If we understand that God's desire is for the common good, we can translate, no one can serve both money and the common good. I think that at the present time, the Chinese Communist Party is more successful in cultivating a commitment to the common good than are the churches in the West. That may be more important than the question of how centralized the power may be."



Dialogue between John B. Cobb, Jr. with Mr. Chunyun Jiang, vice Premier of China, a member of the Communist Party's Politburo, in Beijing, China.

I agree with John, but when we compare China and Europe, there is another important point that could be made: Europe may have achieved certain environmental standards, some of them the highest in the world so far, but they are only implemented on the European territory, for the benefit of their own population. The real plunder and real environmental disaster is 'reserved' for the rest of the world. European mining as well as oil companies are ruining some huge parts of the planet, from South America to Southeast Asia. There, hardly any standards are applied. On the contrary: entire governments of poor countries are being corrupted, just so they accept the environmental devastation that comes with the European industrial, mining or other 'commercial' involvement. On the other hand, China, at least from what I have observed on all continents, is applying precisely the same standards abroad, as it does at home.

COMMITMENT TO THE COMMON GOOD

I wrote to John that during our recent encounter, he stated that one of the reasons why China has succeeded in so many fields is because it can count on many people in its leadership, who are truly concerned about the well-being of their country. This fully coincided with my own experience that I gained in the PRC. But how does John see the West? How different is it in the West? Isn't the Western leadership constructed on thoroughly different principles? He replied immediately:

"Near the end of my answer to the previous topic I made the statement that I believed the Chinese Communist Party was more successful in eliciting concern for the well-being of China and all its people than the Western churches were in eliciting commitment to the common good. For many Christians, this is surprising. Christians have tended to think that we need belief in God to ground our ethical commitments.

No one supposes that a theistic ethic is the only way that people can be socialized with respect to action. Earthly rulers have often considered their will as the grounds of law and ethics. The deepest commitment should be to the ruler and hence to advance the ruler's wishes. But from the Christian

point of view, true ethics must transcend obedience to political power. Might does not make right.

How to live can also be determined by tribal or national culture. This often overlaps with obeying the ruler, but it can even conflict with that. The interpreters of the culture may be identified as priests or as sages.

Philosophers have sometimes attempted to ground ethics in a purely rational way. Kant developed a “categorical imperative.” Whether that is truly free from particular cultural shaping is questionable, but many still think so. Certainly, it may be supported in more than one culture.

For theists, none of these forms of ethics really work. For some of them the alternative is belief that the Creator is also the giver of law, and rewards those who obey in a life after death if not here and now and punishes those who disobey.

Other theists reject this legalism and emphasize that we owe our being and all that is good in our lives to the Creative and Redeeming God. This God loves all people and seeks the good of all. Our grateful response is to serve those whom God loves, namely, at least, all human beings, and especially those whose needs are greatest.

For many theists, right and wrong are so bound up with God that when they hear that Marx was an atheist, they assume he had no ethics. So, for me to say that Marx’s followers do a better job of evoking commitment to the common good than do Western theists strikes some as implausible. They think that if there is no God to serve, one will serve something less than God, and therefore less than the “common” good. Many theists assume that if one does not serve God one is likely to look out only for one’s own good. This assumption is foundational to the academic discipline of economics.

In fact, however, Marx derived from Hegel a sense of a movement in history that should be served. It is a movement that works for a classless society in which the needs of all are met. To work for that society is certainly a way of serving the common good. I believe this sense of participating in a process that works for good is more convincing to many people than serving what has been more conventionally called “God”. The percentage of Western people who take seriously belief in a God who calls us to serve the common good is probably less than the percentage of Chinese who understand themselves to work with the dialectic of history to overcome the class society that leaves so many abused and oppressed.

Neither Christianity nor Marxism has a history of great moral achievement. Both need to be honest about their failures. I will comment on Western Christianity in the modern world. Two Western developments have greatly weakened it. One is the development of science on the basis of a metaphysics that systematically excludes any possible role for God. The other is the development of capitalism, which assumes and celebrates individual self-interest as the one all-controlling motivation. Even faithful churchgoers are likely to be influenced by both of these developments. Among the actual determinants of behavior, theism now plays a small role.

Among Americans, the “American exceptionalism” into which the school system socializes youth plays a larger role. It can lead to heroic acts thought to be in the service of the nation, and even to great passion for the preservation or restoration of the natural beauty with which the nation is endowed. But its primary function is to persuade Americans to accept much profoundly evil activity on the part of their country by assuring them that in the long run this will enable others to share in the great benefits of Americanism.

I am attributing to the American educational system the inculcation of American exceptionalism. However, it officially eschews even this value. Its goal is to be “value-free,” which means in practice, in the service of money. The whole culture celebrates the value of being rich. Economic theory is the national ideology. That Americans are becoming increasingly nihilistic is the natural result of a nihilistic system of schooling.

Sadly, China is going all too far in copying this nihilistic schooling. My view is that the commitment of the government to Marxism has not been allowed to shape the academic curriculum, but that it does provide some important values to supplement the curriculum. And, alongside the general culture, in the Communist Party, a substantial number of people are socialized in Marxist thought and values. It is because Marx has more influence in China than Jesus has in the West, that the chances of China to lead the world toward salvation are better than the chances of the West to do so.”

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Face-to-face Discussion in Claremont, CA, in 2017



John B. Cobb, Jr.:

The efforts to "contain China" lead to absurd statements that automatically identify any expansion of China's international role as Chinese imperialism or at least interference in matters that are not its business. Thus, any action of China in the developing world, however generous and however welcome there will be depicted In the West as cynical self-promotion. China will simply have to put up with this constant distortion of its global role.

Andre Vltchek:

The new 'imperialism' of China consists mainly of helping the oppressed and economically brutalized people, as well as socially devastated nations. That's what, I guess, the West is afraid of, am I right? That China could gain a very positive reputation all over the world.

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Exactly so, China's public image needs to be kept negative in order to justify 'containing China.'

Andre Vltchek:

You have been deeply involved in China. And China is the center, the most important place for your Institute and for your personal work. Could you please speak about the progress that China has made when it comes to the environment; about what we discussed earlier, recently, and off the record? Please talk about that initial longing of the Chinese leaders for 'progress' and for modernization, then how it all led to post-modernism, and finally the transformation of the Chinese government's policy towards the environment and environmentalism. How is it all changing now; how you and your institute actually helped to make the changes happen?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

I'll begin with the latter part of it just to indicate how we got involved, because, of course, we had never planned to get so deeply involved in China. Indeed, we had no idea we could, that that was a possibility. But, in surprising ways, what we were doing with other goals in mind has proved relevant in China in a way it has not proved relevant elsewhere. Insofar, as our work has had, what I would call a historical effect, it has been in China and that has been quite amazing. I think things like this happened because of timing. China after the Cultural Revolution was no longer committed to radical egalitarianism or any of the other goals of the Cultural Revolution. I think neither the public nor the government had any clear goal except modernization.

Andre Vltchek:

We are talking about the era of Deng Xiaoping and after?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Yes. And many Chinese were not satisfied with that. Some of the intellectuals were troubled that China was going all the way towards modernization at a time when, in France, the modern was being severely critiqued in favor of the postmodern world.

Andre Vltchek:

What is the history of all this? How did China evolve from an extremely revolutionary society to the country that was facing complex philosophical and ethical problems ?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Looking back, Mao was a deeply idealistic man who wanted to transform Chinese society radically. He believed that a classless society was not only desirable but also possible. And he really tried to actualize it. His methods involved coercing middle class people to become workers or farmers at least temporarily. For many of them this was a nightmare, and the reaction was such that this effort to institute the Marxist ideal collapsed. The depth of feeling against it was such that no subsequent government is likely to move in that direction. China has continued to reduce poverty and the suffering of the lower classes, but its methods do not include forcing the middle class to give up its prerogatives. Indeed, class analysis has not been a major part of the work of the Communist Party.

When the Party abandoned its intense commitment to Marxism, there was some question about its goals. One goal, of course, was to remain in power. A second goal was to industrialize and grow economically. That is, it would become a great modern nation. In regard to this goal, it has been extraordinarily successful. And its ideals have ensured that the poor have gained along with the rich in ways that have not been true of the United States.



John B. Cobb, Jr. with a farmer in China

Despite its amazing achievements, there have been problems. Modernization has everywhere been accompanied by a decline in the natural environment. The very rapid development of China made this decline highly visible. Even beneficiaries of economic growth could not accept the poisoned air, water, and soil. In addition, Chinese intellectuals were not comfortable with the single-minded pursuit of modernization when European intellectuals were deconstructing modern thought and calling for post-modernity.

Some of the intellectuals called themselves postmodernists, but they still found their situation unsatisfactory. The European postmodernists engaged in brilliant deconstruction of modern thought and practice, but they offered little to replace it. Also, in China the most glaring problem with modernization was the poisoning of the environment. The Europeans did not give much attention to nature. At this point the Chinese learned that there was a movement in the United States that called itself “constructive

postmodern”. That was a new name for Whiteheadian process thinking, which not only gave many positive proposals for what a postmodern society would be, but gave major attention to the relation of humans to their natural environment.

Andre Vltchek:

And Whitehead and his philosophy offered some plausible answers, at least to many Chinese intellectuals .

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Whiteheadian process thinking was a good fit for the needs of Chinese intellectuals, but it had come to this point out of a quite different history. The founder of modern thought was Rene Descartes. He was keenly concerned to liberate the natural sciences from their subservience to Aristotle. To do so he developed a dualistic metaphysics that eliminated purpose from nature. His focus on efficient causes, building on medieval technological advances, inspired a vision of all nature operating by “clockwork.” The natural sciences developed brilliantly based on this model.

Descartes was totally convinced that the human soul was very different from this mechanical nature, but Darwin showed that human beings are a product of natural evolution. This led to a crisis. Either nature is not adequately described in terms of clockwork, for example, it includes purpose and subjectivity, or human beings are zombies. That is, if nature is as most scientists, basing their thought on Descartes, supposed, all nature can be explained by clockwork, and we are part of nature, then we can be explained by clockwork. Any supposition that our hopes and fears and purposes play a role in what goes on is an illusion.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century there were many subscribers to the new naturalism. Henri Bergson was one. William James and Alfred North Whitehead were other examples. In my view they won the argument, but the habits of scientific thinking were very deep, and in the universities the study of human beings adopted the same methods and assumptions that dominated the rest of the university. Since the “experts” are trained in universities, the great majority of them know little about the alternatives. Most of them know that there are some puzzles, for example, about consciousness, but they marginalize these and go about their business.

Some of us found it distressing that the university allowed habits to be determinative rather than fresh reflection and argument. It is clear to us that the neo-naturalists were correct and that even the sciences are in trouble when they stick closely to the Cartesian model. Whitehead's philosophy fits both quantum and relativity thinking far better than does Descartes. It provides a view of nature in which human naturalness can be fully contained. The indifference of the university to all such considerations distresses us, and we have kept Whitehead's contribution alive at the fringes. We call it postmodern, because Whitehead wrote a book, "Science and the Modern World" in which he argued that William James provided the crucial moves to found the new era. He did not use the term postmodern, but we have found it hard to avoid.

We were committed to this for humanistic and even scientific reasons, but our commitment took on new intensity when we realized that modern thought contributed so much to the suicidal behavior of humanity on this planet. We were convinced that the adoption of Whitehead's thought about the natural world and our participation in it would help greatly in the development of an economic theory, for example, that would not celebrate the endless increase of exploitation of nature. We organized the Center for Process Studies to make what contribution we could and held conferences showing the relevance of Whitehead's thinking to many fields of thought.

As a result, when leading Chinese showed interest in "constructive postmodernism" we were ready to display its implications for many topics of interest. This reassured our Chinese friends that we offered a serious alternative. Universities in China developed Centers for Process Thought emphasizing psychology, law, education, science and values, and so forth.

Most important was the adoption by the Chinese Communist Party of the goal of an "ecological civilization." This term had been used occasionally in United Nations literature, but it was new to us. However, we were delighted by its adoption and by the fact that the government encouraged us to be involved in developing its implications. We have held conferences in Claremont annually for twelve years for this purpose.

No doubt members of the Party whom I call "modernists" agreed to the adoption of this goal to quiet the upset of many citizens about ecological problems. They thought it would have little effect on current practices. Some thought that it meant that after China had become fully modernized it would direct attention to its environment.



John B. Cobb, Jr. and Mr. Jialu Xu, vice chairman of China's Parliament. (Photo by Zhihe Wang)

We joined with those who wanted immediate changes. The most important was with regard to rural China. The government was more or less committed to the modernization of agriculture. Modernization here means industrialization. This is taught in all the leading Schools of Agriculture. Nevertheless, some thoughtful Chinese were opposed. We joined forces with them arguing that an ecological civilization requires an ecological agriculture and ecological villages. We are very pleased and proud that the government has shifted to a policy of rural development. This has resulted in a change of net migration within China. No longer is the population movement primarily from countryside to cities. Now there are more people moving from cities to countryside. There are huge problems, but China has a chance of having thousands of healthy villages engaging in among other things, in organic farming.

This is, for me an expression of a postmodern movement in China. It has other dimensions in which we are less involved. The government now gives encouragement to the revival of classical Chinese thought. It recognizes that human beings have psychological and spiritual needs as

well as material ones. Again, there remain enormous problems, but I believe China has a chance to model elements of a postmodern or ecological civilization for the world .

Andre Vltchek:

Let me ask you about Chinese ecological policy. Western propaganda is constantly speaking about all negative aspects of the Chinese approach towards ecology. But, many of us, who know China well, actually believe that there is no other large country on earth that would have such a coherent plan and system to save the environment. It is true that Beijing is suffering from sandstorms and pollution, but it is now in possession of the greatest electric metro network in the world. Chinese cities are being ‘armed’ with all sorts of public, ecological, alternative modes of transportation. Also, the green belts consisting of parks are growing around the cities. China is applying tough standards on emissions and it controls the types of vehicles that are allowed to circulate in the cities or even in the villages – standards that are rarely applied even in the richest countries. It appears that Communist China is in many ways patently ahead of the West and other so-called ‘developed’ countries in its battle to save the planet from environmental disaster. Would you agree with this ?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

In terms of specific steps that have been implemented in China, everything you say sounds right to me. You are much better informed than I. There are two ways of appraising a nation in relation to these matters. One may ask what its present condition is. Or one may ask about the direction: is it getting better or worse? How rapidly?

Judged by the former question, China’s ranking among the world’s countries might be somewhere around the middle. I really don’t know. There is a lot of pollution and other environmental problems. Countries that have long been industrialized are ahead of China in these regards. But if we ask about direction, some have leveled off. Some, such as the United States are no longer concerned, prioritizing corporate freedom over human well-being. Few are improving as rapidly as China. And fewer still all improving rapidly while growing rapidly. This is where China is in the lead.

What is happening results largely from national policies. The most relevant policy is the way provincial governors are evaluated. They are still

evaluated in terms of the GDP growth of their province. But they are equally evaluated by the environmental improvements that are being realized. Accordingly, they seek ways of economic growth that are not damaging to the environment and ways of improving the environment that contribute to economic growth.

They are aided in this bifocal approach by the national policy to set growth goals below what would be possible. This gives the governors freedom to choose forms of growth that improve the situation in other ways also instead of those that would damage it. I am not sure that there are other countries that set their sights so clearly on both/and development.



Green city and ecological friendly buses in China. (Photo by Andre Vltchek)

Andre Vltchek:

Recently, I saw the latest numbers and actually what is again not discussed on the pages of mainstream media outlets, is that Beijing, despite

some obvious prevailing problems, has achieved a much better air quality than such cities as Bangkok and, Beirut, not to speak about Manila or Jakarta. Jakarta is the most polluted city on earth, but Indonesia is a darling of the West, and it hardly ever draws strong criticism. Last year, Bangkok was the most visited city on earth, this year it is number 2, right behind Hong Kong. Nobody thinks twice before traveling to Bangkok, but its pollution level is higher than that of Beijing! Beijing, for some obvious political reasons, falls victim to a terrible reputation. There are several people I know in Europe who refuse to travel to Beijing because they are afraid to suffer from air poisoning .

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

You are rightly pointing out that the world media give an unfair picture of the Chinese situation and its policies. There is no question about this. It treats Russia and Iran in the same way. It treats North Korea even worse. In other words, any nation that does not allow itself to be controlled by the dominant world financial system will be negatively portrayed no matter what it does. In fact, nations that control their own money creation grow more rapidly and more healthily than those belonging to the “free” world. If the media emphasized this, or even allowed this fact to be widely understood, the privately controlled financial system would be in deep trouble. It is essential that countries with nationally controlled banking be pictured by most people as backward and troubled.

For the most part, the propaganda that misleads people does not consist chiefly of outright lies. For example, the rapidity of Chinese economic growth is not denied. But after recognizing it, the article typically goes on to suggest that the growth is fragile, or dependent on unfair treatment of other countries, or connected with imperial ambitions, or accompanied by disastrous ecological problems, or bought at the cost of sacrificing human rights, or..., or.... The reader does not want her or his country to be like that. And usually some facts, sometimes barely relevant, can be cited in support of the negative. I have many criticisms of the United States government. But I regard its propaganda as skillful.

Andre Vltchek:

For me, this is an extremely important question: Do you think that it would be possible to achieve such incredible results in countries that are not Communist? Or do you think that the success is coming precisely because of the still communist nature of the People's Republic of China, and its central planning?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Well, my generalization about this is that in most of the countries of the world their control is in the hands of people whose primary interests are economic or financial. In China, there are very powerful economic and financial interests, but they do not control the central government. Now, there's a lot of corruption, and of course corruption means the interference in policies and in activities by money. In other words, the financial and economic leaders have gained a lot of power. And I expect, there are some cities, in which they exercise a very large amount of control, but at the central government level, thus far, I do not believe that they determine policy. And that makes a huge difference.

Andre Vltchek:

It appears that in China, there is a desire and stamina to improve things. Also, the corruption that you mentioned has been combated with tremendous force, especially in the last years.

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Well, and what they call corruption in China is what we call politics in the United States.

For me, what the Chinese call "corruption" is a matter of crucial importance for China and therefore for the world. Like you, I have more hope for China's growing global leadership than for that of the West. Indeed, much more. This is based primarily on one opinion. I believe that at present the Chinese government is able to make decisions on the basis of judgments about what China (and to some extent, the world) needs. The government may not always be right. It is certainly not infallible. It has a strong need to be liked by the people, a need that may occasionally misdirect it. But it is not controlled by others.

The government of the United States, on the other hand, is subservient to the interests of financial institutions, major global corporations, and some billionaires. Of course, there is no agreement among all of these on all

topics. Trump's policies have the support of some, but they also threaten others. He is a nationalist, whereas the global corporations and financial institutions want to minimize the ability of national governments to interfere with global economic activity. But Trump's nationalism does not grow out of interest in the common people. The America he wants to be great is the America of rich Americans who can act independently of government. I happen to be less opposed to his nationalism than to the globalism that has dominated previous administrations. But this is at best a choice of a lesser evil. Given the control of the nation by financial organizations and major corporations, I prefer to move in the direction of many national economies rather than one global one.

Throughout history, governments have usually been influenced more by the rich than by the far more numerous poor. Rulers have needed money and have been influenced by those who could provide it. If we hold to a political norm that calls for rulers to rule for the sake of the ruled, we will see the great majority of politics as corrupt. The rise of capitalism has intensified this corruption, giving it a certain theoretical support, but far more extensively, creating economic institutions that are more powerful than governments. In the "free" world, privately owned banks are free to control the creation of money and thereby the national, and global economy.

My great fear is that as billionaires and immensely successful businesses come to dominate the economy of China, they will also acquire great political power. My impression is that at local levels the rich often get their way. The usual alliance of government and wealth seems almost inescapable.

However, the Communist Party calls any undue influence of money on political decisions by its correct name: "corruption." The national government has not tried to conceal the fact that corruption is a growing problem. Instead it has taken strong action against it. This is a heroic effort, much to be admired. It shows that the Communist Party is no longer seeking a classless society, indeed, it is allowing the growth of a billionaire class; nevertheless, it is making a heroic effort to keep itself oriented to the common good rather than moving into the service of the rich. I believe that, thus far, at least at the national level, it has not been corrupted. Hence, we have one important nation in the world that intends to serve human beings rather than money.

Can this continue indefinitely? If so, the world has a chance. It would be a new global situation to be led by a nation that put the well being of humanity, and perhaps even of the biosphere, above the short-term profits of the rich. China's official goal of ecological civilization could become the global goal. Real, urgently needed, changes could be made.

One specific change might lead the way. In China, the government creates the money. When this relationship exists, nations can engage in rapid development. In the case of Nazi Germany and imperialist Japan in the 1930s, control of their own money supply enabled them to build powerful armies while still meeting the economic needs of their people. With China, in the past decade, it has made possible continuing growth of goods and services for the people and humanitarian development programs around the world, while building high-speed rail across Asia and beyond.



Elegant and functional metro system in Guangzhou, China. (Photo by Andre Vltchek)

Once the people, even of capitalist countries such as the United States, understand how they are circumscribed and thwarted by turning over money creation to private hands, there is a chance that government will take it back and begin to regain some control over national policies. Even good environmental policies might have a chance. So much depends on the success of China's great battle against the corruption that in general rules the world!

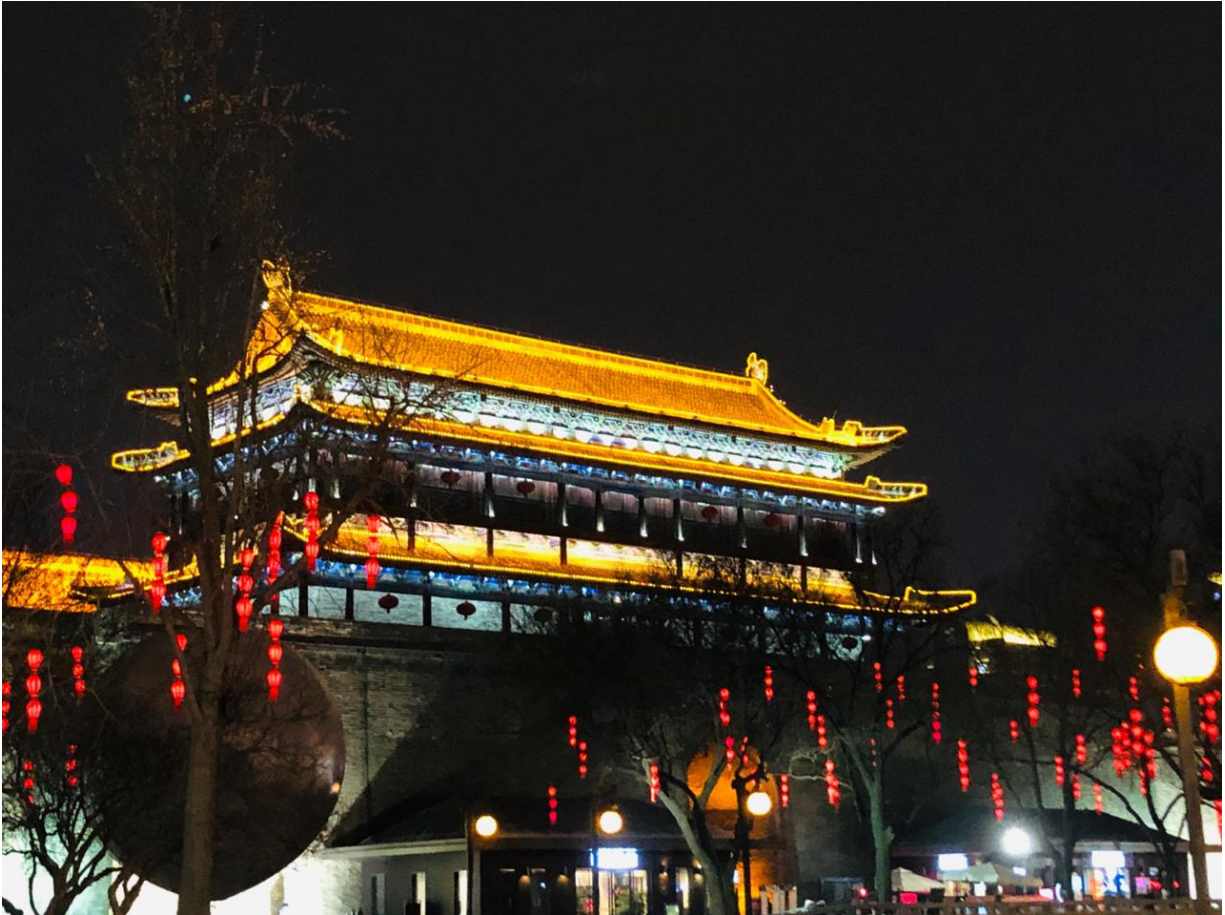
Andre Vltchek:

Exactly! Here it is a legalized corruption, even from the point of view of the Chinese system. But that's understandable, because even in Mexico, the funding of two opposing candidates by the same corporation would be considered illegal. In many countries, what is happening in the West could never be tolerated. In China, actually, the environmental policy is taking center stage, is even being engraved into the constitution. There is also the determined drive by the central government and Communist Party, to 'cool down the economy', to slow down unnecessary economic growth. The Chinese Communist Party and the government don't seem to believe anymore that unbridled growth, economic growth, is actually what is indispensable for China. There is more and more talk about culture, more and more talk about the environment, free and good medical care and education; more and more talk about, actually, the quality of life. This is a big departure from the previous perception of what China should become at the beginning of the 21st century. Do you think it is all connected to the fact that many Chinese people are finally realizing that the model, which the Western culture and capitalism have implemented, even injected, all over the world, is actually leading the planet to a dead end; that if unchecked and un- confronted, in the end it would destroy our civilization and our entire earth, including China itself? Do you think there is some sort of philosophical realization that if the Western concepts were to be followed, blindly, then everything, including the very life on our planet, would soon be lost?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

For Chinese who came, perhaps through the Opium Wars, to realize that the West had "progressed" far beyond China in science and technology, it seemed that the only way to avoid colonization was by imitation. They were probably correct. The Opium Wars certainly did not demonstrate

Western moral superiority, but they did show that the West could force its will on China without exerting itself much. It was very likely to take advantage of that ability. China must respectfully learn.



Beautiful Xian, China (Photo by Andre Vltchek)

From that time to this there has been a general sense that Westerners were more “advanced.” On this there was little difference between those who followed the bourgeois West and the Marxists. China copied the Western educational system, and the best students went to Western universities to study. Western professors were assured a good hearing in China. China promoted its classical achievements because they were admired in the West, while socializing students to think in Western ways. Even the ideal of “ecological civilization” was taken from Western literature.

All this was probably necessary. But things are changing. Western intellectuals are severely criticizing modern Western thought. With respect

to the alternative ideal, taken from the West, “ecological civilization,” China is far in the lead. That lead could draw on classical Chinese thought and demonstrate its value in the present. Most Western visitors were still promoting ideas that China was outgrowing.

This did not mean that China was going to close its doors to Western thinkers. But it no longer gave them special respect just because they were Western. Chinese universities that want to invite a Western scholar to speak are now required to explain why they need to hear from Western professors. That they are Western no longer suffices. The government truly encourages Chinese scholars to think for themselves and lead the way. The more holistic classical Chinese approach can now be a source of enrichment rather than an obstacle to advancement.

Does this mean that Chinese now understand that the modern West is leading the world to suicide? I think that some do. I hope that this realization is gaining ground. It certainly supports the throwing off of any privileging of modern Western thought and thinkers .

This is all encouraging. For it to bear the fruit of which it is capable requires that the whole educational system be revised. It is modern education at its worst. Facts alone are favored. Memorization is the greatest achievement. Passing exams is more important than dealing fruitfully with real problems. All of this was borrowed from the West and exaggerated. It cuts against China’s giving intellectual leadership to the world. Fortunately, it seems that change is likely.

Andre Vltchek:

What about the parallel development: to create a wealthier and more productive country, while actually putting a greater accent on ecology? Do you think such an approach could work?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Yes, China’s dual approach is working. As you note the goal of growth is set below what would be possible, so that the tendency of growth to be environmentally destructive can be minimized. I understand that there may be a two per cent reduction in the goal set for economic growth. This may be unique among the nations of the world.

Since a provincial governor is evaluated on both economic growth and ecological improvement, he is motivated to seek forms of growth that are compatible with environmental improvement. This is a vast improvement

over the global focus on unexamined “growth”, which may still have advocates among modernists in the Communist Party.

I am hoping that the Chinese government will take another step. The GDP that measures what counts as economic growth is focused on market activity. In general, an increase of market activity may be desirable, but policies directed to this alone tend to weaken local communities and transfer wealth and power to urban centers. Typically, the rich grow richer while the poor are left in poverty. China is to be congratulated for having worked against this last tendency with some success. It has greatly reduced what the United Nations defines as real “poverty”, and it may succeed in its eradication in China.

However, simply checking the negative tendencies of what is measured by GDP with an emphasis on environmental improvements is not enough. Real growth should be improvement in economic well-being. And economic well-being should not be separated from human well-being. There is no reason to treat as gain everything that is measured by GDP and to omit everything it omits. Better measures of economic well-being are available. If one is adopted, one measure could count everything that leads to ecological civilization and omit or discount what leads away.



*Green and beautiful Xian, China
(Photo by Andre Vltchek)*

Andre Vltchek:

Another difference between China and the West is that it does not plunder the world; does not behave as an imperialist power. It may be, in terms of its foreign policy, easily defined as the most peaceful major country in the world. After WWII, this Communist country has got involved in very few military conflicts, and none of them has exploded into a major war. Two conflicts that have to be mentioned are the ones with India and Vietnam. But there was no plunder abroad, no overthrowing of the governments, and no theft of natural resources, while the West is doing precisely that – murdering, enslaving and stealing.

Also, one great difference is that, while some Western countries, particularly in Europe, seem to be concerned about their own environment, they are committing atrocities abroad. It is enough to mention Swiss mining companies in Peru, Canadian mining companies in Mexico, or an attempt by corporations like Nestle and Coca Cola to rob through privatization,

water from the enormous and pristine underground Guarani Aquifer, which is mainly located in Brazil and Paraguay .

China does not commit crimes like that. If it pollutes, it pollutes at home, on its own turf, and takes responsibility for it.

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Thank you for your very informative comments. You know much more about this than I. I have rejoiced that China and Russia have combined to offer Third World countries an alternative to the American dominated institutions. The United States has systematically used development programs to bind countries to its leadership as well as to the Western system of finance. I understand that assistance from China and Russia has fewer strings attached. Obviously, national motives are always mixed. I believe China genuinely supports healthy economic development. Given the American aspiration to dominate the world, and the determination of Russia and China not to be dominated, any way that they can help to liberate developing countries to avoid foreign domination strengthens their aspirations. The new Silk Road is designed eventually to help create a Eurasian economy that is independent of the United States. Since I strongly favor a multi-polar world, I fully support China's aspirations.



*Ancient Xidi Village in China
(Photo by Andre Vltchek)*

I fear that there are some respects in which China is adopting neo-colonial relations to developing countries. The reasons are fully understandable. As the Chinese people become more prosperous, they eat more meat. A calorie of meat requires up to ten times more land to produce than a calorie of grain or vegetables. China does not have the land to support a meat-centered diet. The government is responsive to its people's desires and is acquiring land in Africa and the Amazon to produce meat. In so doing it is copying other countries. This activity has immediate pay off to African and Latin American countries, but there are long-term costs. Africa is likely to be the first large-scale locus of starvation. It cannot afford for so much of its best land to be used to feed meat to people in other countries. The Amazon is the lungs of the world. Deforestation for meat production hastens the climate change that is already doing so much damage.

It is asking a lot for a government to try to change eating habits. But a meat-centered diet is not healthy. A combination of teaching combined with full-cost pricing of meat would probably stop the increase in meat consumption -- perhaps even reduce it. In addition, I hope that millions of Chinese farmers will decide to spend their working hours on their small farms rather than in a city and experiment with the labor-intensive three-dimensional gardening that can greatly increase production. If China can again be self-sufficient in food, the whole world will benefit .

Andre Vltchek:

This is quite important to mention; to put this into the context: you were born in Japan. You have lived in the West most of your life, but you are also very deeply rooted in Asia, in particular in China. What is it about the Chinese determination to change things so dramatically, because this is actually an enormous step; an enormous decision on the part of the government of China? No country so far has made such a tremendous step, definitely not any large country. Western scientists, as well as the scientists from the 'client' states, of course must know what's going on, and they must have been briefing their governments. Therefore, we cannot just say that there is total ignorance in Washington or in New Delhi or elsewhere. But there is no determination to actually react and save the planet. What is it about China that makes it so different? Why did it take such a leading role, such an initiative?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

I think there are two questions here. Why did China assert the goal of becoming an ecological civilization? Why has China taken this goal seriously, allowing it to have actual effects in its current policies? With respect to the former question I have no special knowledge, I can only guess. With respect to the latter I have had some involvement.



Wuxi - medieval village (Photo by Andre Vltchek)

In the background of both answers is the particular situation of the Communist Party of China. Unlike most political parties, it is founded in a deep idealism that has evoked enormous personal sacrifices. However, the ideal of a classless society, to which Mao was committed, could not be implemented without a degree of coercion and widespread misery that he finally could not support. This left the idealism without a clear goal. Practically speaking, the Party committed itself to rapid modernization, which meant especially nationally planned industrialization.

The backlash against this was far less than the backlash against the effort to erase class distinctions and privileges. Nevertheless, rapid industrialization led to rapid decline of the environment. The people of China wanted to gain in wealth, but they also wanted to breathe clean air.

To keep its popular support, the Party needed to assure the people that it shared this concern. Committing itself to becoming an ecological civilization provided that assurance.

The question remained as to the practical consequences of the adoption of this goal. It certainly meant reducing the use of coal and increasing that of solar energy. Although China has not freed itself from coal, it has made enormous progress. Clearly China was committed to paying attention to the effects of rapid economic growth on the environment. Its industrialization would be as green as possible.

This kind of implementation was probably not particularly controversial. The adoption of the goal was probably not particularly divisive within the Party. For many, perhaps the majority, it was assumed the focus on growth would not be affected. Only when China had become rich would it give real attention to becoming ecological.

However, the term could be understood as having a deeper meaning. My impression is that part of the leadership has been committed to exploring this deeper meaning and part has not. Thus far the former part has been able to move in this direction. Obviously, those of us who think that an ecological civilization must be quite different from any civilization that now exists, hope for more and more. But you are correct that what is historically remarkable is that a great nation has taken important steps in this direction.

This has involved a critique of the modern ideas that had ruled China both through the bourgeois period under Sun Yat Sen and Chiang Kai Shek and the radical Communist period that climaxed in the Cultural Revolution. Both forms of modernism were contemptuous of the pre-modern. But taking the goal of ecological civilization seriously led to recognition of the inadequacy and even self-destructiveness of the modern. Classical Chinese civilization was far more “ecological” than the modernity that had succeeded it. The adoption of the goal of an ecological civilization opened the door to appreciation for, and selective re-appropriation of, traditional Chinese wisdom. Even its spiritual aspects need not be wholly rejected. The world has not yet appreciated the importance of this new openness to renewal of an ancient civilization. It is a major step toward a healthy post-modernity.

The recognition of the limitations of modern thought have led to ending a period when Chinese universities welcomed Western academics, almost indiscriminately, to address their students. The great majority of these

academics are thoroughgoing modernists. The suggestion is that China has gone far enough in the appropriation of Western modernity. It is time for Chinese to integrate what is valuable in modernity into a larger synthesis .

Modernity calls for “growing” as fast as possible. This “growing” is measured by Gross Domestic Product. Its increase is understood to be an indication of national power as well as of the well-being of the people. But what is measured in the GDP does not include what is prized in classical Chinese culture or by those of us who are concerned for the natural environment. The government took its commitment to ecological civilization with sufficient seriousness to set a second goal alongside growth of GDP. That is the goal of maintaining the health of the natural environment. To make this second goal effective it systematically reduced its specific growth goals below what could be achieved if growth alone mattered. I doubt that this has been done by any other government.

Related to these developments, but in my view even more important, has been a reversal of policy with respect to rural development. The modern policy by which the Party had been guided was here, as elsewhere, industrialization. This is the substitution of machines and fossil fuels for human and animal labor. When the goal is economic growth, the increase of per capita production in relation to such labor is an unmitigated good.



*Lotus lake and Chinese girl
(Photo by Andre Vltchek)*

On the other hand, when viewed from the perspective of ecological civilization, the depopulation of rural China and the institution of unsustainable agricultural practices would be an almost unmitigated loss. The government was moved by this realization to replace the policy of industrialization with one of development of rural villages and towns. This is, of course, an enormous task, one that is in its infancy, but already the flow of population between countryside and cities has been reversed. For the first time, more people are moving from cities to rural China than the other way. There is interest in developing organic agriculture and eco-villages. These could, someday, be the basis of an actual ecological civilization. In China, as perhaps nowhere else, the adoption of an ideal for the future has proved fruitful in the present. There is still a long, long way to go, but this should not deter celebration of what is already happening.

Andre Vltchek:

From my experience, the Chinese people are actually going to all corners of the world, from the US to Europe, to Cuba, to South America, and of

course all over Asia. They study and they bring home many different ideas, and they select what could, from what they learned and after being to some extent reshaped, actually work for China. Sometimes I hear statements that the Chinese people are getting influenced too much by Europe, for example. Of course, in some ways they were; they are. But what is not mentioned is that often, not always but often, they only take what they want from Europe or elsewhere, and they commonly reshape it so it fits and serves their own country.

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Your picture of Chinese going all over the world to learn from others and then bring the best ideas back to China is certainly an attractive one. No doubt it is at least partially true. I am very grateful that among the places they come is Claremont, and it is our honor and joy to share ideas with them.

My problem is that you connect this process with study, that I fear is usually at universities, and, on the whole, I do not consider them good places to learn what I consider most important. The liberal arts tradition that dominated universities until the twentieth century created institutions that had many problems and limitations, but it did encourage reflection and creative thought. Fortunately, it has still not been completely eliminated. But those universities regarded as the best have shifted their academic goal to “research.”

Of course, universities have always encouraged research in the sense of studying to advance knowledge. But the topic of research and the way it was done was long informed by the humanism embodied in the liberal arts. Now “research” replaces humanism. Humanism is centrally about values. The great universities now declare themselves “value free.” They put forward the point that research should proceed in an unbiased way, completely open to evidence, whether the researcher’s hopes are supported or rejected. But it means much more than that.

For the sake of research, the liberal arts have been replaced by “*wissenschaften*.” In English we speak of “academic disciplines.” In this new ideal, the topics taught to students are not selected because of their importance to human beings, and they are not taught with the goal of benefiting students or society. A topic is simply a part of the whole that lends itself to description and analysis for the purpose of increasing

information. A professor of biology does not select material for the introductory college course with the purpose of helping the students obtain the knowledge about the living world and her body that would enable them to live more wisely. Biology 101 is the introduction to Biology 102. The students are being prepared to specialize and then do research on any topic of biology where there is a chance of gaining new information.

This preparation is also socialization into the guild of biologists. Within that guild one learns not to be influenced by questions of value. Of course, in fact, since most research is expensive, the university is very much influenced by what it can find money to study. The values of the rich and powerful, though not discussed, play a large role. People are also encouraged to attend a university chiefly because of the promise of a better paying job, wealth becomes the supreme value.

Since the “best” universities today are collections of academic disciplines, they rightly describe themselves as “value free research” universities. Students attending them learn that questions of value are distractions from what is truly important. It will be very difficult for Chinese students to spend years in this atmosphere without being socialized.

This is not to say that the Chinese gain nothing from studying abroad. China wants to become a leader in research. Many universities are good at what they do. Students can get many ideas about how to advance research more rapidly. My concern is that they will also bring home the ethos into which they have been socialized. Since this ethos is not discussed within the universe as one possibility among others, graduates are rarely conscious of how their basic thinking has been changed.

Andre Vltchek:

I fully share your concerns, John. But what I meant was precisely that: research, or classic Western music, for instance. My good Chinese friends became some of the greatest pianists, for instance, after graduating from Manhattan School of Music and other excellent conservatories. Of course, it does not mean that China should abandon its own tremendous music tradition, and the country, of course, doesn't do that. But about the ethos – you are definitely right: some bring it home, although others see it as something to avoid, after returning back to China .

From my experience, Chinese people, particularly those ‘educated ones’ have an unrealistically positive impression about the West; about its culture, politics, even way of life. This was, no doubt, injected into them through the imported Western culture, through foreign mass media, but also through the schools, mainly universities. Some graduated from colleges in North America or Europe, and began judging, analyzing their own country from the Western perspective. That turned out to be extremely dangerous, and it caused, I believe, great damage, to the nation.

But there are, I believe, two interesting and important steps being taken in China, in terms of education. After President Xi Jinping came to power, he reaffirmed that China is a Communist country. He said something along these lines: if China does not provide excellent and free education for all, excellent and free medical care, if it doesn’t take care of the housing shortages and high prices, if it does not manage to protect the environment, it will lose the right to call itself a Communist country. I believe that this was the signal, a very important sign that the country is ready to move both forward, away from the intellectual dependency on the West, and also ‘back’ towards the Communist ideals. Of course, the question remains: ‘What kind of Communism?’ Definitely not an oppressive and dogmatic type, but an already relatively free and people-oriented Communism, although with, for certain pragmatic reasons, a Communism with at least some capitalist features, in short: Communism or socialism with the Chinese characteristics. After all, China is a part of this world, and this world is, unfortunately, still controlled by the capitalist dogmas. China does not want to live in isolation. It can only help to shape the world, and to change its direction, if it is interacting with all nations on our Planet: culturally, economically and socially.

One of the most important changes, I believe, that came with President Xi Jinping, were substantial reforms in education, and also the great accent on Chinese culture. I don't know if you are aware of the statement that was made, some time ago, by the Minister of Education of China? He was bitterly complaining that the Chinese universities are being infiltrated by Western ideas, and they are actually used against the Chinese model of ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics’. He clearly indicated, he warned, that this was not going to be tolerated.



Communist slogan at Xian subway: “Building Nation Together” (Photo by Andre Vltchek)

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

I worry about the goal of “excellent” education. Of course, if I can define “excellence”, I will strongly support it. But too many people leave it to the most prestigious universities to tell us what excellence is. If China continues to allow “excellence” to be defined by capitalists, such education will not support the goal of Communism.

I think my comments in the previous response make my concerns clear. Capitalism reduces value to wealth. Thus far it has dominated the university world. This world has persuaded educators generally to see success in terms of continuing education climaxed in the graduate programs of the great universities. These universities also teach teachers or, in many instances where they do not, influence the teaching of teachers. The exam system is shaped to their norms. Even childhood education is being

affected. Personal wealth is the one great aim of individuals. This is a poor basis for erecting a socialist society.

I am very sympathetic with the Secretary of Education who felt that universities are being infiltrated. I wish, however, that infiltration was the primary problem. The deeper problem is that the Chinese copied a Western, capitalist educational system. They thought that because it was value free, it could be used by Communists as readily as by capitalists. They were mistaken. Communism is deeply rooted in the value of justice and of the individual's responsibility for the whole. Value free education systematically undercuts these values. The implicit teaching of nihilism actually harms capitalism as well, but since capitalism supposes that it flourishes when individuals look out only for themselves, its problem with nihilism is less direct.

Infiltration may be a problem. Perhaps Chinese practitioners of academic disciplines have allowed themselves to be influenced by a prejudice in favor of human flourishing both individually and collectively. Perhaps Western visitors make them aware that they are infringing on the "value-free" norm. Perhaps in departments of economics, radical individualist self-interest is toned down, and perhaps Chinese professors are embarrassed about that when confronted by prestigious Westerners. To the Western academic, socialism appears as an ideology, which means a theory corrupted by values. Perhaps Chinese professors of economics have violated the purity of the guild and visits by Westerners have made them feel guilty.

In any case, China has cracked down on Western visiting scholars. I regret that I can no longer speak easily in Chinese universities, but for China I rejoice. But the value of making it difficult for foreigners to speak will be limited if the norms and ideals of Western capitalism continue to control the structure of Chinese universities as a whole as well the examination system.

Andre Vltchek:

After the changes in the government policies towards the environment, I hope that the country is now ready to reverse the trends in academia and in education generally. It appears that China is once again becoming a socialist country, or to be more precise, it is becoming much more socialist than it used to be before the arrival of the current leadership. I would say, a new type of socialism or even communism is being shaped here, but socialism it

is, nevertheless. It is definitely not a Western-type of Communism, perhaps it can even no longer be called Marxism (and that is why many Western critics of China in the West, even from the 'left', are panicking, and attacking China for 'not being Communist enough'), but *it is* a 'socialist' system, which has deep foundations in the thousands of years of Chinese culture.

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

What excites me about your ideas is that you envisage a new kind of socialism. I am strongly opposed to individualism. The philosophies of the West, beginning with the Greeks, thought of the world as made up of entities each of which existed in separation from the others. Each of these was a substance, and the atomists thought that the larger substances, with which we are normally in contact, could be analyzed into their atomic, or indivisible, components. This meant that the whole of nature is composed of separate individuals. Individual people were also understood to be substances.

This individualist philosophy was retained and even intensified in the Enlightenment. Modern philosophy has drawn forth the implausible implications of substantialist thinking, but it still rarely challenges the individualism that gives rise to them. Modern science picked up on this kind of thinking, and mainstream economic theory took it over. The consequences for the psychological and social sciences are even worse than for the natural sciences. Since economic theory has supported capitalism, and the corporate capitalism that became economically and politically dominant is wrecking the world's ecosystems, this, above all needs changing.

I much prefer socialism to capitalism. It takes the well-being of the whole population seriously, and it does not assume that indiscriminate "growth" is the one valid way of helping people. It is especially concerned for the workers who are so exploited by capitalism. But it still tends to be substantialist at the metaphysical level. Often, either the social group is simply the set of all its individual members, or the society, or the classes of which it is composed, are attributed substantial existence in themselves. There are problems with any of these solutions. These problems are not only theoretical; they have played themselves out in socialist countries.

The substantialist conceptuality that creates these problems in the West was not part of classical Chinese thinking. The alternative was worked out most systematically in the Buddhism that came to play a large role in China. Further, substantialist thinking was not needed in order to express Marx's original and creative insights. But since he did not directly oppose it, his followers usually use standard Western metaphysics to explain and develop his vision. Would that Chinese would incorporate Marx's insights and values without this damaging metaphysics. A Buddhist socialism, or a specifically Buddhist Marxism would advance the cause. Philip Clayton's book on "Organic Marxism" provides a version readily understood in the West.

In philosophical terminology, what the West has barely developed is the doctrine of "internal relations." Substances remained unchanged by external influences. Only their properties change. The alternative view, one that fits both Buddhism and the findings of modern science better, is that an individual entity is not a substance at all, but rather a synthesis of relations. The entities to which a new occurrence is related are partly reproduced through the relationship. So, each entity is constituted by aspects of previous entities.

This is hard to understand if we take our sense of what is real from the objects of sense experience, especially of sight. If, instead, we recognize that the act of seeing is more fundamental than the patch of colors it objectifies, and that in individual experiences, seeing is synthesized with hearing and touching and other sense experiences, but also with pain and pleasure and pressure and attraction. The experience as a whole synthesizes all of this along with memory and anticipation. We can easily understand that the experience that is the creative unifying of all this is not a substance. Again, it is a synthesis of relations. The relata are internal to the new experience.

This means that human beings are not really separate entities from one another. Paul the Apostle understood that we are members one of another. I am what I now am because of millions of past events as well as a creative act of synthesizing the relations to all of these.

Once we include internal relations, we begin to think of "communities." They are, of course societies. But they are societies in which all recognize that each participant consists, in large part, of relations to other

participants. What happens to every other person in the community happens also to me.

When we think of societies, we sometimes think of zero sum games, in which a certain amount of goods is distributed among a certain number of people. If some get more, others get less. We can work toward justice or equality here, and socialist societies do so. But once we understand that we are members one of another, that is, “internally related” to one another, then we see that each of us is affected by the experience of each of the others. What happiness is felt by others in their acquisition of goods becomes also a part of us. There is not a fixed amount of happiness to be distributed. Each recipient can enjoy the joy of others. Of course, we all also share the disappointment and feelings of injustice that may follow from the distribution.

To make clear that the social reality to which socialists commit themselves consists of communities, I prefer “communitarian” to “socialist.” But I sense that one can easily, and correctly, consider this a new form of socialism. It would be easy to show that “the Chinese characteristics” that Chinese employ to qualify what they take from the West, could easily include internal relations and their consequences. China is well positioned to embody and make visible a new kind of socialism.

Andre Vltchek:

I strongly believe that precisely this is happening right now in China. Of course, it will be a long process, due to so many internal and external factors. But China will, un-doubtedly, lead the way; China and Russia, I believe, but also Cuba.

China, compared to the West, is an extremely deep and flexible nation. Europe and North America are, in many ways, two fundamentalist parts of the world, suffering from serious complexes of superiority. That explains why they treat the world as they do: in a thoroughly brutal, selfish fashion. Intellectually and spiritually, they do not evolve; they are regressing. They are ruling the world, using violence, deception and fear. China is the opposite. It tolerates the others, and it learns from them, and about them. Then, and only then, it chooses its path forward.

China is not judgmental. It is humble. The West is so arrogant, that it even dares to decide for the greatest nation on earth, whether it is socialist or not!



Electric buses in China (Photo by Andre Vltchek)

I think that in China, the first step was to recognize that there is an environmental problem. What followed was the government's involvement and change of policies. I heard from my colleagues, during my interaction with the China Academy of Social Sciences, and Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, but also from the people who teach at the leading Chinese universities, that there is this profound recognition of the problems in Beijing; recognition of the problems that China is facing, both in the field of the environment and education (both issues are interconnected, I believe). I was told that the alarm bells have been ringing for quite some time. The Minister of Education spoke, the President spoke, and it is obvious that they are fully aware of the problems. They are aware of them, and they are concerned: they are searching for solutions. Now there is also a big opposition, even among the professors, to the Western forms of education that were injected into the Chinese system. Students are not happy either – they are definitely not appreciating this rat race at the

secondary schools and the universities. So, let's hope that these present reforms are going to lead to positive and permanent changes. Do you, personally believe, that the trend is reversing or at least that it is ready to be reversed?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

It is indeed very good news that so many Chinese recognize the seriousness of the problem with the Western-style education with which they have saddled themselves. I wish there were analogous dissatisfaction in the United States. I hope that the problem recognized in China is about the very nature of education, and not simply easily correctable problems with its present form.

On this point, as on many others, I have much more hope for China than for the United States. China aims to be socialist and to be going toward an ecological civilization. The United States claims some kind of "exceptionalism" such that when it destroys nations and kills children, this is justified by the wonder of American imperialism. Its universities claim to be value free and certainly not to be in the service of any ideology or particular goal. Accordingly, in China one can point to a great gap between announced aims and the results of the dominant educational system. In the United States, the university exists in order to do research, and it delivers what it promises, generally in the service of the military or of industry.

Ever since World War II, what the United States has done has been widely copied. Hence this country has had a great opportunity to lead the world. For the most part, it has led in the wrong direction. The United States and the whole world, including China, are paying, and will continue to pay, a high price. But the days of American leadership are ending. I would still like for the U.S. to engage in major reforms, but it is too late for these to change the world.

Andre Vltchek:

I fully agree. The United States should, and maybe one day will, engage in some sort of reforms, but it will be in order to save itself from the ultimate collapse. It is not in a position to lead the world, anymore. Not in education, not in medical care, or in quality of life, definitely not in how to build a just and egalitarian society .

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

We can rejoice that the American century is giving way to the Chinese century. This is clearest in economic and political affairs, but these will spill over into education. If China engaged in a major study of current universities and what they communicated to students, and then noted the difference between what a Chinese education actually does to students and the announced goal of “ecological civilization,” this would get some attention. If it followed up with positive proposals about what universities can do to prepare people to create and inhabit an ecological civilization, the results might be truly revolutionary on a global scale.

I think that Marxism may have inculcated in many Chinese a desire to save the world. In the United States, professors are told that this is none of their business. Their job is just to add to the storehouse of information. If China showed the world the great difference it makes in education between committing to doing what society really needs and the American “value-free” alternative, it might generate reform in many places! What a great way to inaugurate the Chinese century!

Andre Vltchek:

One extremely important difference between China, Russia and the West is that these two countries do not plunder others, in order to improve the lives of their citizens. This, in the future, can make their global leadership extremely attractive to the rest of the world.



Rows of electric buses in Xian, China (Photo by Andre Vltchek)

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

I regard the academic disciplines as a curse. They have replaced the liberal arts, which were much better, though certainly not perfect. I would like to see students helped to understand the world they live in and prepared to give leadership in moving it toward an ecological civilization. This would be a very different goal from either liberal arts, which express classical humanism or academic disciplines, which express capitalist economism.

As taught in American universities, the academic disciplines are oriented only to research. That is, the purpose of each academic discipline is to increase the information available on the topic of that discipline. Since research typically requires funding, most of it serves the interests of those who pay for it. Since academic disciplines pride themselves on being value free, the only goal that sometimes competes with money in determining

what research is done and what is taught is the advance of the discipline. There is no place to consider or evaluate other consequences.

Very few of the world's most pressing questions fit into any one discipline. Multi-disciplinary research and teaching end up being a hodgepodge rather than a creative response to a world in which all things are interconnected. This means that even if the university was persuaded to promote study and research oriented to urgent global needs, faculties are not well equipped. But in fact, universities are nothing more than collections of academic disciplines. They proudly describe themselves as value-free research institutions. Their graduates, especially their PhDs, are well qualified to teach the discipline and to do research in their specialized field. They are not qualified to help in serious discussions of how to save humanity from self-destruction. Often they are not particularly well qualified for the vast majority of jobs, namely, jobs other than research.

Now I hope that I exaggerate the extent to which Chinese universities are composed of value-free academic disciplines. But general talk about reform does not assure me that the disciplinary structure of the university is being critically reconsidered. Analogous talk in the West certainly does not normally lead in that direction.

The ostensible justification of the ideal of being value-free is that values are relative to particular cultures or classes, or even individual preferences. Universities should deal only with what is objectively true or accurate. Hence values should be excluded. By this exclusion they teach students to suppose that right and wrong, better and worse, are not topics for reasoned conversation. Some people may be glad that humanity is committing suicide. Others don't like it. Those differences should not be discussed in an academic context. An influential book, addressed to professors is entitled "Save the World on Your Own Time." That is not what you get paid for.

Since both the Chinese Communist Party and the national government have affirmed the goal of "ecological civilization," China could re-define academic institutions as committed to that value. It could encourage research that promoted ecological civilization. It could help youth to envision this goal and dedicate themselves to its achievement. This would not put an end to specialized research. But the topics would be influenced by the broader goal. A few students should be taught how to do this

specialized research, but most should learn how to contribute to an ecological civilization, of course, in many particular ways.

Equally important is to end the highly competitive nature of current schooling. Students learn to work hard to do better than one another. There are winners and losers. Class distinctions are intensified. The competitive and disciplined graduates of these schools are ideal workers for a capitalist society.

Other forms of schooling are possible. Children can learn to work together to accomplish what as individuals is not achievable. They can be educated for a socialist culture rather than a capitalist one.

One possible reform that would help reorient thinking about education would follow from the government's decision to develop rural villages. One factor all over the world that has sped the decline of rural life is that schooling has, from its origins, prepared people for urban life. When schools are located in rural villages, this orientation almost always continues. Rural children are told, at least implicitly, that success requires going to the city. Teachers are typically very proud of the students who leave the village and succeed in the city.

If China wants to develop its villages, it should cease to teach children to prefer urban life. This would require reflection about every aspect of schooling. I have repeatedly argued that farming is the most important profession. The task of China's farms to become sustainable and supportive of the whole nation in a time of climate change, exhausted aquifers, and melted glaciers is supremely important for China's future and extremely demanding. We need the brightest and best living and working close to the soil. Perhaps this is the most important reform of all.

Andre Vltchek:

And this is actually happening right now. For the first time, the trend has been reversed and more Chinese people are moving back to the countryside than the other way around. It is because the standard and quality of life in the Chinese countryside has been improving dramatically .

And we actually agree that academic disciplines are a curse. But what about highly technical fields: architecture, law, medicine, for instance? Should they be taught at the universities as they are now, or should they be read at separate institutions of learning: at specialized schools? And how is it in China?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

If we become serious about ecological civilization we will need to think radically about education as a whole. Ivan Illich wrote about "de-schooling" society, and that implies that we should not identify education with schools. But for now, I'll assume that universities as institutions will be needed and the question is how the "academic program" and the "professional programs" are to be related. Currently the professional schools appear as impure forms of education created as compromises with the practical needs of societies. But if the entire university developed as a program to prepare people to work for an ecological civilization, then it makes sense that this includes many specializations. Indeed, the number of "professions" for which universities would prepare people might be increased. Certainly, they would include agriculture, forestry, fisheries, perhaps also animal husbandry, gardening, water management, energy creation, etc. I would like to see universities themselves have specialties. Even the standard specialties in the physical and social sciences would consciously aim to direct teaching and research to how they can contribute to ecological civilization.

To the best of my knowledge Chinese universities are much like ours, and I have not heard of serious reflection about how they should change to promote the goal of ecological civilization. However, many experimental programs are taking place both in China and in the United States that give hope for real change.

Andre Vltchek:

Well, there were very negative trends in education in Russia, too - just after Gorbachev and especially during the Yeltsin era. For instance, Russian schools, even high schools and colleges, adopted almost blindly the Western system of tests. You had to choose between A, B, C... It was thoroughly primitive and absolutely foreign to the Russian and Soviet education models from the past. It brought down the standards at Russian schools. I was invited to speak, at an important conference in Moscow, three years ago. It was organized by the City Council of Moscow, and it was focusing on the educational reforms in the Russian Federation; basically, how to restore the extremely good education models of the Soviet Union. During that conference, top Russian educators reconfirmed, using both soft and strong language, which this blind following of the Western models managed

to create an entire generation of idiots. That it transformed one of the best-educated countries on earth to one that was suddenly full of functionally illiterate individuals. Russian educators noted that the infiltration of the 'lowest types of Western culture' into the Russian culture had managed to destroy great Russian traditions, like those of reading books, poetry, philosophy and listening to classic music. Reading and thinking from an early age used to be something natural for the majority of Russian people.

Things went so far that in several far-eastern provinces, and in the cities of Petropavlovsk (in Kamchatka), Khabarovsk, and Vladivostok, there were protests by local teachers but also by students, against this sort of education. So, many in Russia, like China, recognize that adopting the Western style of education leads to a dead end - to the collapse of knowledge, spirituality and creativity. Now there is a huge attempt to bring back the Soviet-style education, which was, in many ways, very progressive.

It appears that almost every big country has been experimenting with the western-style of education. But at least in China and Russia, many educators, students and government officials have finally realized that it brings extremely negative results.

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

What you say about traditional Russian education and what continued in the Soviet period is fascinating. I have known hardly anything about it. It seems to fit into my third category of types of education. The two that have dominated in the United States have been the liberal arts and the academic disciplines. The third is "intellectual," that is, encouraging students to think independently and radically.

I had the great good fortune to be a student at the University of Chicago when its chancellor was Robert Maynard Hutchins. He believed that the university should encourage thinking about important questions. The college was based entirely on the study of the "great books." In the Divinity School, I was made to feel that my task was to figure out what I believed and be prepared to articulate and defend it. I am glad to say that great books are still studied in the college, but in the university as a whole, including the Divinity School, the academic disciplines have triumphed.

Intellectual concerns have never been central to higher education in the United States. They were marginal to the liberal arts and are completely excluded by the academic disciplines. That they have played a large role in Russia in the past, and that Russia is now considering recovering something of this sort is indeed good news.

Andre Vltchek :

The same could be said, of course, about both Cuba and Venezuela. Great books are being distributed to the public, for free or for symbolic price, by the state publishing houses, not only in big cities, but also in the countryside. Chavez used to argue that it is thorough nonsense that only elites and university-educated individuals could read great poets and novelists, even philosophers. Truckloads of books containing novels of writers like Victor Hugo or Maxim Gorki, or poets like Pablo Neruda, have been distributed to the urban poor and peasants, for free. And they have been reading them; they understood! Great books are always comprehended by the masses.

In Russia, the changes are most likely going to lead the country back to the education system, which the country had during the Soviet era. That's good, and it is also what many people desire and demand. In China, and you know probably as much as I do, and most likely much more, there seems to be some considerable resistance to the positive intellectual and spiritual changes.

John B. Cobb, Jr. :

Many Chinese have long felt that something is missing from the educational system they took over from the West. At one point, John Dewey was studied as an advance over the liberal arts. Now academic disciplines dominate, and the Chinese recognize that they encourage students to work "inside the box." Graduates are skilled at doing mainstream research, but they are not so good at major breakthroughs. And many Chinese recognized that education should not be limited to "research."

A decade or so ago, the government decided to check out a Whiteheadian alternative. A Whiteheadian educator was given the opportunity to experiment. I was told that there were twenty million students involved. I have the impression that the experiment was relatively successful but that many of the children's parents were concerned that the children were not

learning the vast number of facts on which they would be examined. They were probably correct. They were being prepared for a thoughtful life rather than for an examination of how much they had memorized. The experiment was abandoned.

That dissatisfaction continues I have no doubt. I hope it is building up to a point that the examination system will not be determinative of all of schooling. Teaching for the test is not real education.

Andre Vltchek:

In a highly industrialized, or in a post-industrial country like the United States, the ratio between the urban and rural population is very different than in China. People who work in agriculture are in great minority; percentagewise in single digits. Agriculture enterprises in the United States are mainly like huge corporations, where food and feed are ‘produced’, manufactured, and not made with love and patience. But, in a country like China or especially in some less developed countries like Vietnam, the majority of people still lives in a countryside. There, it's an absolutely different story.

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Yes, it's absolutely different. But I think the education is still urban-oriented.

Andre Vltchek :

It is, yes. It is both urban-oriented, and to a great extent influenced by foreign thinking, particularly by the West.

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Neither country has a healthy rural life. In the U.S. there is hardly any rural life at all. Perhaps one day enough people will move back to the countryside to establish organic farming. In China, the government reversed itself in time to save most of the rural villages. The problem is that rural people think the farms are too small to support them. They rent them or pay someone to farm and leave children with grandparents while they go to the city to earn money. This is certainly not desirable. But since the government is working for the revival of the villages, there is a real possibility that the future may see a healthy rural life.

This depends on several things. But perhaps the most important is education. If Chinese school rural children were to believe that success is

passing exams that have nothing to do with rural experience and life, the chance for real improvement in the villages is poor. But if the Chinese leadership would see that for the future health of China farming is the most important profession and develop an educational program geared to excite students about the possibilities and responsibilities of farmers, desirable changes would occur. Next to education comes money. One possibility would be to develop part-time businesses in the villages that could supplement income from farms, while farmers learn to make their farms more profitable. The government could help on that score by insuring good prices for farm products.

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4

Conversations in 2015

Andre Vltchek:

Why am I here at this Whiteheadian Conference, which is taking place, in Claremont, California?

The environment of this planet is obviously disappearing, getting ruined. I see it everywhere wherever I work: in the South Pacific, Indonesia, Malaysia, Africa, Peru. It is not just about the crusades anymore, or new crusades or the imperialist wars. And the 'environmental issues' are not just about one destroyed beach or forest - we are talking about the disappearances of entire nations, islands, or tremendous areas like the delta next to Dhaka, in fact almost the entire Bangladesh. We are talking about the almost total destruction of Kalimantan, Borneo; the third biggest island in the world. These are absolutely concrete dangers and threats that I have witnessed with my own eyes, especially in the South Pacific and Asia. Is humanity mad, as Noam Chomsky thinks, is it really self-destructive, or is it so badly informed, kept in the darkness about the situation?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Thoughtful people judge that Western civilization is crazy in that it socializes people to behave self-destructively. I share this view. Of course, ignorance plays a role, but the ignorance is often chosen. Misinformation is often intentional. This ignorance and this misinformation are part of our insanity.

That Western civilization is certifiably insane does not mean that other civilizations are free from craziness. But whatever insanity may characterize some of them is not very important at present. Our focus should be on exposing the insanity of Western civilization .

Andre Vltchek:

And the West is still in the driving seat, of course...

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Yes, the West is in the driver's seat. Indeed, it is not only there. It has become the whole car.

Andre Vltchek:

Yes, its culture, it penetrated other great cultures worldwide, as we both often point out; it penetrated even China and its education system...

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Oh absolutely.

Andre Vltchek:

....and the way Chinese people think.

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

There is no question that when China sought to become a modern nation, its goal was informed by the Euro-American Enlightenment. That was the revolution led by Sun Yat Sen, who was thought of as the George Washington of China. The leaders suppressed traditional Chinese thought because it was seen as blocking the acceptance of Western achievements. It was excluded from the universities.

I think that what was wanted most were Western science and technology and political and economic power. But Chinese were attracted also by individualist human rights and democracy.

Andre Vltchek:

You had many Chinese delegates here, at Claremont. I don't know how many, but it looked like at least 100. You are admired in China; you are interacting, working, very closely with the Chinese people, with Chinese experts, and Chinese environmentalists, and even, or should I say especially, with the government. Do you see the Chinese as more rational beings when it comes to the environment and to the survival of the human race? I ask this because it seems like what the Chinese delegation has been proposing here and what China is already trying to do at home, has not yet been done in the United States or even Europe? And China is a much poorer country on a *per capita* basis ?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

There is no question that our efforts have been far more influential in China than anywhere else. The Chinese sent a delegation of 300 to the 2015 conference to which you refer. That was something very special. However, we hold a conference for them every year on Ecological Civilization, and we expect from sixty to a hundred Chinese to attend. Of course, the fact that both the Communist Party and the national government of China have written the goal of becoming an “ecological civilization” into their constitutions and we have been given a role in spelling out what that means gives me hope for China. But the real question is what that says about the deeper difference between China and the West.

I have said many times that I have more hope for China than for any Western nation. I have least hope for the United States. This is because Western nations have given power over their actions to the financial sector. This is most evident in the United States, and some European nations are doing far better than we. But we saw in the case of Greece that the banks have the last word. In China, the Communist Party is not controlled by the banks. It can express the common sense of the people. Even in the United States the majority of the people oppose the government’s worst imperialist policies.

Andre Vltchek:

However, it is often an armchair resistance...

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Yes. It is an armchair resistance. People have gotten accustomed to watching the government act in ways they do not support. In many countries, if the governments acted as the people desire, there would be hope. This is true of the United States. That governments be controlled by the will of the people is the idea of democracy, but in the United States there is no democracy and less and less pretense. Today the majority of the people want single-payer health care, but neither political party supports it. The majority of Americans are sympathetic with the Palestinians, but both political parties are wholly supportive of Israel’s oppression. The vast majority of Americans are opposed to a war against Iran, but this gives us no assurance that a war will not be waged. Wall Street in general and Goldman Sachs in particular, easily outweigh public opinion. To have any hope for Western nations acting wisely on environmental or any other

issues, we have first to hope for a radical change in the power structure. The Chinese power structure is already free to act and often acts well. It is; however, well to notice that occasionally public opinion shapes American policy when the deep state is taken by surprise. For a few years, during the administration of Richard Nixon, good environmental legislation was enacted.

Andre Vltchek:

Under Nixon of all the people?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Yes, there was a brief period when the realization that the world was headed on an unsustainable path was intensively discussed with real feeling and concern. The media gave full attention to the new understanding. It was not treated as a political issue, but as a human one. Conservatives have as much interest in surviving, as do liberals. Nixon happened to be president and neither led nor opposed what the public wanted. But when the financial community understood that the policies that responded wisely to the crisis would threaten its control and profits, all this changed. The media, which is, of course, owned by the rich, fragmented the unified move for sustainability. The best the people have been able to do since then is to defend the legislation that had been passed.

In China the question is whether the new billionaires can be controlled by the Party. Thus far, the creation of money, which in the West is in private hands, remains controlled by the Party. Further, the government is making strenuous efforts to limit corruption. Will this prove possible? There is real danger that, once it has allowed, even encouraged, huge concentrations of wealth, the Communist Party cannot prevent money's distortion of political power. I do not know, but I remain hopeful .

Andre Vltchek:

I remain hopeful as well!

Here, it seems, we are addressing the main difference between Western capitalism and socialism with the Chinese characteristics. In the West, the government is 'indebted' to the corporations, to banks, to private interests. Voters became irrelevant. It is clearly visible in the United States, but also in the U.K., Italy, and even in the rich Asian 'client' states, like Japan. In China, on the other hand, there are some billionaires and there are several

mighty private corporations, but they have to play by the rules that are dictated by the Chinese government and the Communist Party of China (CPC), who both represent the people. It is not a perfect system, but I believe it serves the citizens much better. In addition to it, it looks like there is a new wind blowing now in China, with President Xi leading the country, that, socialism is once again in control...

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Right now, he is trying to stamp out corruption.. .

Andre Vltchek:

Yes, and very forcefully...

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

And if one used the same definition of corruption you often do, there would be no one left in Washington DC, they would all be in jail.

I'd also like to share some ideas about how China is measuring the progress. I wrote an essay about it.

One of the great obstacles to real progress is that the almost universally used measures direct action in the wrong direction. I speak of the Gross National Product (GNP) and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). These are measures of market activity. They correlate closely with the use of natural resources. It is supposed that people's economic condition is improved when they use more resources. The differences between them are of minor importance with respect to the issues now before us, but whereas until relatively most records were kept in terms of GNP, now GDP is almost universal. Accordingly, in what follows here, the contemporary criticism is of the use of the GDP, whereas historical comments are often of GNP.

There is some correlation of GDP and economic well-being when one considers only the present. There are still many people on the planet who are not well-fed, well-clothed, well-housed, well-schooled, and so forth. When their condition improves, this increases the GDP. When the use of the GDP is criticized, this point is trotted out in defense, and the well-off critic is accused of indifference to the suffering of the global poor.

However, this defense of the status quo actually carries little weight. To feed a hungry person today in such a way as to ensure that she will not have food tomorrow is not an expression of positive concern. The present level of resource consumption is unsustainable. Every increase hastens the day

of absolute scarcity. We may be sure that those who will be the first to have to do without are the poor. Sustainability is of extreme importance to them. A measure of “progress” that does not consider sustainability is not a measure of real benefit to the poor.

Further, the GDP does not subtract for losses. Wars, earthquakes, and fires are typically great for GDP. Nothing is subtracted for the enormous destruction. But the rebuilding is all added. The cost of deforestation of a country is all added, and nothing is subtracted for the loss of all the services the forest performed. I recently heard that the vast reduction of oysters in Chesapeake Bay has ended their invaluable service in purifying the water. But this does not show up in GDP.

Since housework and childcare provided by homeowners is not a market activity, we are told that we are better off when this is done by others. Now that it takes two jobs to support a family, the GDP benefits both from moving housework and childcare into the market and from doubling the labor of the couple. Some of us think that we were better off economically when one job sufficed, and parents cared for their children.

A measure that treats waste, destruction, and increased pressure to work in the market, as pure goods and is indifferent to future consequences is surely not the way to measure real progress. Many have recognized this. Two types of alternatives have been proposed.

The ideal one is that we measure directly what we consider to be genuine progress. This would be a measure of sustainable human well-being or, still better, the sustainable well being of life on this planet. Regrettably, no one knows how to do this. Bhutan has wisely set as its goal human happiness or well-being in distinction from economic growth. Would that all nations would do so! But today, judgments about this would be so vague that in many instances we would be left with no guide except personal preferences.

We still need economic measures that are of the contributions of the economy to human well-being, but that does not mean we should use the GDP. We can and should greatly improve this measure, as has been done in the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare and its successor, the Genuine Progress Indicator. But our choices of policy and action should never be decided by an economic indicator alone. We should be concerned with the quality of childcare, for example. To encourage loving relationships is more important than to improve economic activity, however measured.

Despite these limitations, especially given the harm done by the present index, a change from it to a better one may be the most important change that is immediately available to shift human behavior away from its current suicidal form. I have personally been working on this since the eighties. Others had been doing it much earlier, including leading economists.

They had done excellent work. I found the Measure of Economic Welfare of Nordhaus and Tobin. It was a great improvement over the GNP. But after they created this measure, they belittled it. I found their judgment very strange. They pointed out that over the 1929 to 1965 period in the United States; there was a rough correlation with GDP. They drew the conclusion that there was no need to change.

I found this interpretation of their work astonishing. Their figures showed that indeed during the depression increases in GDP and MEW were highly correlated. But after World War II they began to separate, and in the last decade before they ended their measures, the MEW had actually declined while the GNP continued to rise. They had written that they undertook the project because of pressure from environmentalists. Clearly, their interest was in arguing that no change was needed. Their results showed an urgent need for change, but they drew the conclusion they wanted.

I gathered a small group, including people who were far better qualified than I, to work on such matters, and in the end, most of the work was done by my son, Cliff Cobb. Our first idea was to bring the MEW up to date. We felt quite sure that its contrast with GNP would become more and more evident. However, some of the sources they used were no longer available, and as we got into the details we were less satisfied. So, we developed our own measure, the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare, and calculated the ISEW of the United States from 1950 to 1990. We leaned over backwards to limit ourselves to changes from the GNP for which existing economic theory called. We did not challenge the assumption that the increase of market activity was, in itself, positive. We paid several leading economists to criticize what we had done, and they did not identify any errors.

Milton Freedman indicated that he personally would not use the Gini coefficient, but he recognized it as a legitimate measure if one thought that it was better for income to be more evenly distributed. Many economists think that a more even distribution is better, so we kept it in the ISEW.

Another economist noted that we had not included the positive value of leisure in our index. We had experimented with that, and in the Genuine Progress Indicator a modest inclusion was worked out. It is important to note that all agreed that leisure had declined, so that the gap between the ISEW and the GNP would be increased. Indeed, some economists value leisure in such a way that the gap would have been greatly widened. But we wanted to be conservative and stick to matters of consensus, and we had found no consensus among economists about how to evaluate leisure. For example, was the leisure of a man with a million-dollar annual income ten times as valuable as the leisure of a man whose income was one hundred thousand dollars a year? If a man could not find a job and quit looking, was his unemployment “leisure?” How one dealt with these issues had an enormous effect on the index. We decided it was better for us to ignore it.

We showed that even when we forewent the inclusion of leisure and other elements that would strengthen our case, increasingly, just as with the MEW, the ISEW declined as GNP rose. Specifically, in 1979, the United States per capita ISEW was \$3527.1, while the per capita GNP was \$6,573.3. In 1989, the per capita ISEW had declined to \$3220.4 while per capita GNP increased to \$7764.4. For a substantial rise in the indicator used to measure economic progress to be accompanied by a considerable decline in a much more accurate measure of economic well-being surely indicates conclusively that measuring economic improvement by GNP should be discontinued.

We naively thought that if we produced a measure that uncritically follows the teaching of the dominant mainstream economic theory, some economists would appreciate our help and might even promote its use. One reason for paying critics was to ensure that some influential economists were fully aware of what we were offering. But, of course, there was zero response of this kind.

My reason for telling this story in detail is to show how conservative has been most of the work on alternative economic measures, including ours. We introduced nothing into our measure that was unacceptable to mainstream economists. In fact, sustainable economic welfare is declining much more than this indicates. Leisure has declined considerably; so, the more fully leisure is introduced into a new index, the greater would be the gap between the new measure and the GNP. At the theoretical level

economists should be enthusiastically promoting proposals for the sort of changes made in the MEW and the ISEW.

That economists do not even discuss such matters, therefore, is not explained by their theories. Like much common sense, the idea of changing the measure is ignored, and even silenced, for non-theoretical reasons. Some of this may just be habit and laziness, but it is hard not to suspect that there is a cozy relationship between the economics guild and those who profit from the present system, that is, the corporate world. The increase of market activity is also the increase of corporate profit. That corporations profit at the expense of human well-being is not an entirely new idea. We live in a world where most governments serve corporations. In this world, little can be done beyond protest.

As I have recognized the irrelevance of argument about these matters in the United States, and that a theologian can hardly be a match for the guild of economists, I have largely given up. I have rejoiced that there has been improvement of the ISEW under the new name of the Genuine Progress Indicator. I have been pleased to see occasional references to the GPI, and I am pleased that individuals have worked out the GPI for other countries. Even in the United States, it is important news that the GPI is used in the state of Maryland. But I have recognized that as long as corporations, and especially financial ones, control governments, there is no prospect for change. And the “experts” serve their masters well.

When it turned out that China, with a government not in the service of the corporate world, paid some attention to criticisms of global capitalism, I began talking about this matter there. I congratulated the government for ceasing to evaluate provincial governors only for increasing GDP. It had added environmental improvement as an equal concern. This expressed the seriousness of China about the goal of ecological civilization. Still, I continued to hope that China would replace the GDP with a better measure of economic improvement.

A professor of economics at Peking University has improved the GPI for use in China and worked out the relation of GDP and GPI for every province. Overall, it resembled the MEW in that in the earlier years they were highly correlated, as hundreds of millions of people were lifted out of poverty, both indices rose. But with time they separated, and at least in some instances, the GPI has turned down while the GDP continued to rise. It is time for China to abandon the GDP altogether. Since it is not

controlled by corporations, I am deeply hopeful that it will do so and that it will develop a more radical, and more accurate, index than did we.

If it does, China will liberate itself one more step from global capitalism. Its judgments about economic policy in China will be improved. I celebrate that. But China's judgments are already moderated by a wider range of concerns. My greatest hope is that, when Third World countries learn that, and why, China has abandoned the GDP, they will follow.

In recent decades corporations wanting to exploit resources in Third World countries have been able to argue that these countries will be benefited, that is, that their GDP will be raised by this exploitation. Often in fact the economy has been severely damaged, but the GDP is not affected by this damage. If China chooses a sensible way to evaluate economic progress, perhaps the countries that have been most severely damaged by the use of the GDP will awaken to what is going on in the American capitalist world .

Andre Vltchek:

Also, when you compare modern China to Japan; I mean, you were born in Japan, lived in Japan, and we both, I guess, like various things about Japan very much and we know all the positive things about Japanese communalism and relatively just distribution of wealth. But even Japan doesn't come anywhere close when we compare its cities to the development of the Chinese cities, what is done there for the people. I am talking about the great system of public transportation, which is really popularly priced. The buses are 5 times cheaper than in New Delhi; in Beijing which is, I don't know how many times, richer than New Delhi, there are enormous public parks being built, exercise machines, preventive health centres. Public communal centres, theatres, concert halls, museums, sea and riverfronts, and free places to exercise are everywhere. In Indonesia, in the Philippines, there is hardly any space, anymore, even for the public sidewalks, because everything is stolen. Cities there have literally collapsed; they are built against the people, instead of for the people. So even when we talk about corruption in China, we have to compare corruption there to corruption in other countries...

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Thanks for all this encouraging information. I have no doubt that you are right. There is much to be celebrated. China understands the danger of corruption and at least at the level of the national government, I think plans and policies are little distorted by preferential treatment of the rich. The campaign against corruption is succeeding.

My comment is only that China's allowing the emergence of a class of super-rich individuals and powerful corporations creates a situation in which fighting corruption will be an ongoing task of great difficulty. If a future government lets down its guard, the infiltration of money into politics will expand rapidly. I would feel more secure if the government showed more concern about multiplying the potential centers of such corruption. But this anxiety about the future should detract nothing from appreciation of the present.

Andre Vltchek:

But we don't precisely know, yet, which direction all this is going to move in. Deng Xiao Ping was implementing reforms, some say right-wing reforms, for decades. For years now, with the new government, things are going in the positive direction, towards the Chinese-style socialism...

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Yes, we hope so. I have hope for China...

Andre Vltchek:

And you have worked for it, for an egalitarian, truly educated, and ecological China, very hard.

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Of course, I work for ecological civilization in the United States also, but there has been very little response. So, yes, I think China has the possibility of becoming a healthy model for the rest of the world.

Andre Vltchek:

What would it take; more anti-corruption eradication campaigns, more ecological policies...?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Just a continuation. Of course, since I think that a healthy society needs to be rooted in a healthy use of the land, and a healthy relation to the land;

preserving rural China and then really developing it in a healthy way is essential to a healthy future.

Andre Vltchek:

So, Sheri Liao is one of your...

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Yes, Sheri Liao is my heroine...

Andre Vltchek:

Sheri Liao, is she your protégé, is she your colleague or how would you define your relationship with her?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Sheri Liao has been working on developing ecological villages in China long before I knew anything about this topic .

Andre Vltchek:

Also, Vandana Shiva was here, a very impressive Indian scientist, and you work with her as well?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

No, I haven't had any inroads in India. Well, we had a conference in India; so I don't want to say zero, but close to zero.

Andre Vltchek:

We often discuss Chinese culture, knowledge and education. If we look at the Chinese culture, if we look at the history of Chinese culture, the same as Korean culture or Japanese culture, it was emphasizing knowledge. Their thinkers were always considered the most respected people in the society. Do you think it is totally changing now?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

I think there is a chance that the current renewal of the relationship to classical Chinese thought, which the Chinese Government seems to be now encouraging, after having discouraged it for so long, might renew some of what is best in Chinese culture. It may lead to re-thinking education in a way that would mean that schooling is really interested in developing human beings who will be effective leaders in society and be able to

transmit the culture and its values. Education as a whole should not devote itself primarily to preparing people to do research. I don't think that research should be the major goal of education.

Andre Vltchek:

Do you see Maoism as just a small deviation from European Marxism, or do you see it as a totally Chinese way of conducting Communist revolution?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

That is not a question I should try to answer because I know very little about the different schools of Marxism. It seems to me in practise; at least, it was quite different from the Soviet Union or Cuba, or any other one example. But at least it was clear that the philosophy that was guiding Marxism was a different philosophy from the philosophy that had guided the bourgeois form of modernity .

Andre Vltchek:

You are 90 years old, this year; I hope that you have many, many years ahead of you, that you will still have a huge impact on this great struggle for the survival and improvement of our world. But tell me; are you optimistic at your age?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

No, I am not optimistic. I sharply distinguish between optimism and hope. To be optimistic you would need to see trends toward the actions needed to escape really terrible catastrophes. You would have to see these trends growing in strength rapidly enough to make a huge difference. So far as I can see, there is no discernible trend in any nation toward making the radical changes that are needed. Based on this, you could reasonably claim the probability that we will avoid extreme disasters. I cannot see any of this.

But for hope, this is not needed. One needs to believe that much of it is not impossible. One needs also to believe in "miracles" in the sense of totally unexpected events. There are times in the past when public opinion changed with great rapidity. Suddenly governments were confronted with popular demands that had previously been negligible and marginal.

Or the popular leader of a major nation might come to the recognition that the future of life depended on her or him, and make the changes needed

to avoid global self-destruction her or his highest priority. And it is possible that billions of people would be moved to support her or him.

Or there might be a technological breakthrough that would end the need for fossil fuels quickly. Or all the moral and spiritual leaders of the world might unite in a call that broke through the barriers to wise action. Or..., or....something more surprising still. One who is not optimistic may still hope. For us Christians, such hope is nourished by belief that God, the fountain of all novelty, is everywhere calling humans to break out of their habits and venture into a new world order.

In any case, I think that eventually the remnants, after all the catastrophes, will find some way to survive, and I think that there is a good chance that they will adopt a better philosophy. And I also think that even without a miracle, the scope of the destruction and the losses that we face can be reduced. I think that calamities are inevitable, but exactly how serious and terrible they are is still open to influence by our actions.

Andre Vltchek:

Do you think that the answer, the solution, will paradoxically come from the countries that were considered, by Western civilisation which is suffering from frightening complexes of superiority, as lower, even inferior, like China, Russia, Latin America, Iran?

John B. Cobb, Jr.:

Yes, well the countries that have adopted full mechanisation and industrialisation are the ones that will suffer most. But the people that still live on the land and have ability to feed themselves, they will suffer because that will be more difficult due to the climate changes, I'm not trying to make it easy, but more of them will survive. And this is one reason why in China I feel so passionately about rural policies. China still has a large, basically healthy, rural population. There are millions of people who know how to produce food and to take care of themselves. And they can be helped to be more prosperous. If they will stay on the land they have a real chance of surviving many of the catastrophes that may wipe out urban populations.

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John B. Cobb, Jr.: My 2018 Fall trip to China

Yesterday I returned home from a trip to China (including a few days in South Korea). In Seoul I met with Andre Vltchek, and I agreed to write a conclusion to our book based on this most current experience. Written in the afterglow of the time there, it will be even more impressionistic and personal than most of what I have contributed to this volume. To generalize about more than a billion people based on real acquaintance with a handful, and with some slight contact with, perhaps, a thousand, is certainly not a scholarly activity. But I will do so anyway .

The trip began with a ceremony establishing the thirty-sixth center for process studies in a Chinese institution of higher learning. I mention this to make clear that the reception of Whitehead's philosophy in China is at the opposite extreme from that in the United States, where the only such center is the one I organized with David Griffin at Claremont. It is also a tribute to the excellence of the work of Zhihe Wang and Meijun Fan who have established the Institute for the Postmodern Development of China (IPDC) through which all my work there has been done. It is they who have pushed me forward in China; so that I am treated there, and only there, as a VIP. That all this has happened to this Christian theologian late in his life continues to astonish me, flatter me, and give me a sense that, after all, I may be making some contribution to God's creation.

For several years, I have been spending a week in China annually. This time, the trip lasted from September 20 to October 20. Much of the respect I have in China is that at the age of 94 (Chinese count) I can still travel and speak. I am able to do this only because everything is arranged, and I am

completely cared for, by Zhihe and Mei. Every day we are together in China, they amaze me, and I bask in the attention they have directed toward me.

On this trip, I was impressed by the change from a visit just a year ago. This change was very personal, but, just for that reason, very powerful. There was personal warmth in the relationships this time that went beyond the friendship and acceptance I have long felt. My escorts and managers from time to time would tell me that now the Chinese people “loved” me. “Love” was not a word I would previously have used. Two examples at opposite extremes of age and status will give some concreteness to my unjustified generalizations and exaggerations.

We spent a few days in the far north, in Harbin, as guests of Harbin Normal University. The warmth and excitement of their welcome was palpable. They gave me a scroll, which explicitly spoke of their “love”. As well as I could understand, they have for several years been studying the philosophy of Whitehead, and they have found it personally, as well as professionally, liberating. The Americans who have previously discussed Whitehead with them such as Jay McDaniel, Bob Mesle, Paul Bube, and Kevin Clark have mostly been my students. So, I get credit for this now important part of their understanding and living. I believe they really enjoyed my simply being there and really wished I could stay longer. They think of me, as an intellectual grandfather.



John B. Cobb, Jr., Mr. Xu and some process community members in Beijing .

My staying a month in China was due to the invitation of Mr. Xu, the vice president of the Chinese Parliament and, therefore, of China, asking me to take part in two conferences, one in late September and one in mid-October. I had met him a year earlier, and we had hit it off well. I wanted to give him what support I could. Regrettably his health has declined. He attended both conferences briefly in a wheelchair.

When he was leaving the first and when he was arriving at the second, I went to greet him. In both instances he rose from his wheelchair and

embraced me with what felt like real affection. The words he spoke to me supported my interpretation. I think he was expressing his real feeling. I was, and continue to be, deeply moved.

However, like most of us, I consider the possibility that the actions of the powerful may also have political meaning. In this case, such meaning is possible. For a couple of years, the Institute for the Postmodern Development of China was controversial. We were attacked by some orthodox Marxists as Christians and as Americans. Specifically, our supporting the government's lowering of growth expectations so that economic growth could be targeted in less destructive ways showed, in their view, that we were agents of the U. S. government, trying to slow down China's march to wealth and power. Because we had become controversial, university bureaucracies were hesitant to support the attendance at our conferences of their professors. This was a special problem for our annual conferences in Claremont on "ecological civilization."

The top leaders of the country did not involve themselves in this discussion. So, I was fairly confident that little would come of the attack. I even thought that the wide coverage of the controversy by the press was all to the good; but my Chinese partners, who are not Christians, felt the accusations more personally and were more anxious about the results. It occurred to me that Mr. Xu's very public and highly visible embrace might be a further signal that we could be trusted. For me, such a purpose does not detract from the expression of affection.

It may be that the loving tone in the actions of Chinese was to some extent expressions of appreciation that we did not withdraw because of the attack. I don't know. But it did seem to me that this year it was accompanied by increased attention to what I said and proposed. A year earlier I complained that I had become an "icon" in China. Conference organizers wanted me to be in the photograph, which often seems to be the most important part of the conference. They did not seem much interested in what I had to say. This time I never had that feeling. People were interested.

There is still another possible explanation. The Chinese government comes closer to being like that of Plato's philosopher king than I see in any other major nation. Both Xi and Xu are insightful thinkers concerned for the well-being of their nation and its people. I find much to admire in what they do, and I am happy to support the goal of ecological civilization and

the steps they have taken in that direction. But this has urgency for me that they do not express. I believe that our current global civilization could collapse at any time for financial reasons or through a nuclear war. Even if these eventualities are avoided, the world seems to be heading for climate disasters in a decade or so. If our leaders find ways of coping with extreme problems caused by weather, we will face the unsustainability of other aspects of our civilization.

I am preoccupied with what actions now can make it possible for more people to survive and then rebuild in a less unsustainable way. I think many Chinese leaders share my concerns, but they do not talk in this way. I understand this, at least partly, as strategy. The Chinese people may work better if they suppose it likely that they are creating a better world for their children.

“For the Common Good”, the book I wrote with Herman Daly, appeared during the year in Chinese translation. In our very brief conversation, Mr. Xu said: “I carefully read it from the first page to the last page.” I think he wants me to know that he will be trying to move China in the direction the book encourages. In many ways, that will be a renewal and transformation of classic Chinese culture, Mr. Xu's special focus. I think he finds support in that book for renewing distinctive Chinese wisdom rather than adapting to the Western Enlightenment and that he finds this deeply satisfying.

As one would expect, a number of people wanted to know my views on the trade war with the United States initiated by Mr. Trump. I told them that I was against the “free trade” that was threatened by this war. China had certainly speeded up its economic development by entering the global economy, but I personally had always worried about this strategy. The more China bound itself into the capitalist global system of both trade and finance, the less free it became to express its own socialist and ecological values. It is my hope that China will recognize that it is quite large enough to be a self-sufficient economy. It can be largely independent of capitalist globalism. I hope it is not too late to move in this direction without extreme disruptions. Of course, most of my interlocutors were no more pleased by this response than are American Trump-haters.

The import that is currently most important for China's economy is oil, most of which comes from the Persian Gulf region. I have long noted that dependence on this resource gives great power over China to those who may wish to have political control over it. In this regard I got some very

encouraging news from a fellow Californian who has led a team working for Mr. Xu. His team has found a method to transform China's vast deposits of dirty coal into clean coal. China may be able to provide most of the energy it needs without major dependence on imports. A remarkable side-benefit is that the "dirt" separated from the coal contains just the ingredients needed by Chinese farms and can enable them quickly to free themselves from the chemicals that are damaging the soil as well as the food.

One of the evils of the global system that China has seemed unable to resist is the use of GDP as the measure of economic well-being. It is in fact nothing of the kind. It is more a measure of the rapidity with which a nation is exhausting scarce resources. If nations want to measure their economic well-being, far better measures are available.

The book mentioned above, recently translated into Chinese, includes a proposal for an Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare, (ISEW) which can be justified on the basis of accepted economic studies. It shows that at times, including when that book was published, the rise of the GNP is accompanied by a decline in the improved measure. At my prodding, my son, Cliff, completed the work that a group of us in Claremont had started. It has been further developed as the Genuine Progress Index (GPI). There are still better indices that break with standard economic theory.

My impression is that during times when most people lack the money to buy needed consumer goods; the increase of GDP is likely to be accompanied by a lesser increase of the ISEW. When basic needs have been met, the further increase of GDP actually lessens sustainable economic well-being.

I paid some leading American economists to evaluate our early work on the ISEW. They found no serious faults or reasons not to employ the index they recognized as an improvement. I hoped that they might use their status to propose a shift in the United States. They did not. I concluded that the GDP was the standard measure for the global economy because it does correlate well with the prosperity of the great international corporations. I still hoped that a socialist country could reject it.

On this visit I talked with a high official who years ago developed a green GDP and pushed for its use. He told me that it was opposition from special interests, I assume corporations, which blocked its use by the Chinese government. I was glad to know that the idea had been seriously

discussed, but I was very disappointed to learn that the power of corporations is already very great in China. My discussant said that he was, for a while, imprisoned by those who did not want a change.

In China, nevertheless, there seems to be considerable discussion of alternatives. The one that seems currently to have the best chance is the GEP, Gross Ecological Product. This is currently being used in Yunnan Province. How helpful it will be remains to be seen, but alongside my distress that Chinese corporations like American ones have veto power over proposals for improvement, I rejoice that both at provincial and national levels, China is engaged in intense discussion of a topic that is not on the political table in the U.S. My idea that I should try to awaken the Chinese to the evils of GDP accounting is completely outdated, if it was ever relevant.

I found a somewhat similar situation with respect to education. This currently combines the worst features of Eastern and Western traditions. The East has provided the national examination system that forces children from the age of four to spend much of their time memorizing facts of little interest to them. Meanwhile, from the West they have adopted an educational system geared to “value-free research” instead of benefiting children or preparing them for a multiplicity of types of contribution to society. Socializing children to be contemptuous of values is schooling them in nihilism in a world that urgently needs them to share the government’s commitment to human survival in the form of “ecological civilization.”

For the most part the role of the IPDC is to organize conferences, lectures, translations, and new writing projects. These do not involve institution building. However, the issue of education is so important that, under the leadership of Meijun Fan, the IPDC is undertaking a long-term project in China. It is beginning on a very small scale. The Xuling Eco-village of Sansheng Valley, an unusual eco-village with unusual leadership and commitments, has other small-scale educational activities, and it is working with Meijun Fan on hers. On this trip, a small institution called “Cobb Eco-Academy of Sansheng Valley” was established on Oct. 3, 2018. We believe that fundamental philosophical assumptions are important and should be included in a model for education for ecological civilization. So also, is actual experience working with the land. In addition, students need to learn to work together to solve problems. Perhaps a radically different

educational model, actually implemented, with neither grades nor degrees, however small the scale, can influence larger institutions and programs. Perhaps a rich example of real education will be imitated. In any case with the help of Xuling Eco-Village of Sansheng Valley, Meijun is moving ahead.

On this visit, I decided to push also for college education geared, not to value-free research, but to creating an ecological civilization. Just as I was getting ready to move into a college lecture hall to make my pitch in Lishui, Zhejiang province, I learned that this very college was committed to initiating such a curriculum next year. I was delighted. I hope to learn that, in a similar way, the great majority of issues I observe are being studied and discussed and even experimented with. I was also told on this trip that recently 6 Chinese prestigious universities such as Peking University-China's Harvard, Sun Yat-sen University, etc, established the College of Agriculture. This can be regarded as another signal that China is moving towards the resurgence of the countryside and building an ecological civilization.

Under these happy circumstances, I suggested to my partners, it was time for me to retire. But it seems not to work that way. Highly placed Chinese, who need no guidance from me, want me to speak to other influential people. For example, there are not enough members of the Communist Party to fill all the important policy-related positions. They need to appoint others to such positions, and they select gifted people. But they want these people to share in the goal of ecological civilization. So, they have created a special school to teach non-Communists the party-line. The president of the school wants to develop a several day program in which I would participate. I would be working with people who had already been selected for influential roles in society. I would not be telling them anything he could not. But he wants another voice to supplement his own.

I am happily amused that I may have some responsibility for a change of policy in China that largely excludes me from lecturing in universities there. I have often complained that much too much authority is given by Chinese scholars to European and American ones. In my view, Chinese education would be much better if the Chinese allowed their own, more organic values and worldview, to play a larger role. Prestigious American scholars tend to follow Harvard's self-description as a value-free research university. To be repeatedly encouraged to be more nihilistic by those to

whom one gives academic authority blocks the way forward. Whether my arguments have had anything to do with the change I do not know. But it has become the case that daunting bureaucratic paperwork is now required before inviting a foreign guest to speak.

As a theologian it seems proper to me to close with the topics in which theologians often take a special interest. I have found that university professors in China are much less prejudiced against theology than are American academics. I have never concealed my faith, and sometimes it has seemed to be appropriate to show the close kinship between Marx and Jesus. Both stood in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. Both criticized the “religious” leaders of their time. Both emphasized that the goal is justice, especially for the poor and oppressed. But it has seemed wise to avoid any further entry into Christian theology.

Of course, we learn nothing about the special problems of an industrial system from Jesus. And we learn little about dealing with the interior needs of people from Marx. On this trip I found that Chinese working in various levels, and sometimes simply speaking out of their personal need, addressed me in my capacity of Christian theologian.

Bringing up the lack of spiritual guidance in Marx is now widespread among Chinese Marxists. They see that both Buddhism and Christianity are growing rapidly. After a century of repressing classical Chinese culture and thinkers, Marxists are turning to them for help. Alongside fundamentalist Marxists one finds fundamentalist Confucians. But most Marxists and most Confucianists are ready to seek common ground. The central government is encouraging the exploration of this possibility.

The early twentieth century rejection of classical Chinese thought was largely because it had failed to provide China with a science and technology that could protect it from Western military power. By “modernizing,” China maintained its independence and survived Japan’s invasion as well. But now, having cut itself off from its own moral and cultural roots, and having discovered that neither the Enlightenment version of Western thought, nor that of Marx, provides an alternative, it is in trouble. A recovery of its classical culture can help to meet the spiritual ethical and cultural needs of China. It can provide grounds for the quest for ecological civilization.

But if China makes these moves while continuing the commitment of Western science to the seventeenth-century metaphysics of mechanism, the

mental split will take a heavy toll. This may be the point at which Whitehead's philosophy of organism can help the most. Whitehead recognized the congeniality of his philosophy of organism with classic Chinese thought, but he had come to criticize the mechanism still assumed by most science, precisely from the discoveries of science. It would take a long time for Confucianists to develop independently an organic science. Beginning with Whitehead's scientific revisionism could speed the process and even put the Chinese at the front of the direction that even Western science is reluctantly going.

Although Whitehead was a mathematical physicist, we have focused on his potential contribution to ecological civilization and said rather little about his scientific revisionism. Despite our lack of attention, some Chinese are working on this. It is time for us to join them and support them. So, perhaps, in the late teens of the twenty-first century, China will lead me back to "science and spirituality," a range of issues that became important to me when I was a student at Chicago in the late forties of the twentieth century. I will then owe China yet one more debt, and, if so, I will indeed be deeply grateful.

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ABOUT JOHN B. COBB, JR.



John B. Cobb Jr. (born February 9, 1925) is an American theologian, philosopher, and environmentalist. Cobb is often regarded as the preeminent scholar in the field of process philosophy and process theology—the school of thought associated with the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. Cobb is the author of more than fifty books. In 2014, Cobb was elected to the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

A unifying theme of Cobb's work is his emphasis on ecological interdependence—the idea that every part of the ecosystem is reliant on all the other parts. Cobb has argued that humanity's most urgent task is to

preserve the world on which it lives and depends, an idea, which his primary influence—philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead—described as "world-loyalty. "

Cobb is well known for his trans disciplinary approach, integrating insights from many different areas of study and bringing different specialized disciplines into fruitful communication. Because of his broad-minded interest and approach, Cobb has been influential in a wide range of disciplines, including theology, ecology, economics, biology and social ethics.

In 1971, he wrote the first single-author book in environmental ethics—*Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*—which argued for the relevance of religious thought in approaching the ecological crisis. In 1989, he co-authored the book *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, Environment, and a Sustainable Future*, which critiqued current global economic practice and advocated for a sustainable, ecology-based economics. He has written extensively on religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue, particularly between Buddhism and Christianity, as well as the need to reconcile religion and science.

Cobb is the co-founder and current co-director of the Center for Process Studies in Claremont, California. The Center for Process Studies remains the leading Whitehead-related institute, and has witnessed the launch of more than thirty related centers at academic institutions throughout the world, including twenty-three centers in China.

John B. Cobb Jr. has held many positions including Ingraham Professor of Theology at the Claremont School of Theology, Avery Professor at the Claremont Graduate School, Fullbright Professor at the University of Mainz, and Visiting Professor at Vanderbilt, Harvard, and Chicago Divinity Schools. His writings include *Christ in a Pluralistic Age: God and the World* ; and, with coauthor Herman Daly, *For the Common Good* , which was co-winner of the Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order.

ABOUT ANDRE VLTCHek



Philosopher, novelist, filmmaker, investigative journalist, poet, playwright, and photographer, Andre Vltchek is a revolutionary, internationalist and globetrotter. In all his work, he confronts Western imperialism and the Western regime imposed on the world.

He has covered dozens of war zones and conflicts from Iraq and Peru to Sri Lanka, Bosnia, Rwanda, Syria, DR Congo and Timor-Leste .

His latest books are *The Great October Socialist Revolution: Impact on the World and Birth of Internationalism* , *Exposing Lies of the Empire* , *Fighting Against Western Imperialism* and *On Western Terrorism* with Noam Chomsky.

Aurora and *Point of No Return* are his major work of fiction, written in English. *Nalezeny* is his novel written in Czech. Other works include a book of political non-fiction, *Western Terror: From Potosi to Baghdad* and *Indonesia: Archipelago of Fear*, also *Exile* (with Pramoedya Ananta Toer, and Rossie Indira) and *Oceania – Neocolonialism, Nukes & Bones* .

His plays are '*Ghosts of Valparaiso*' and '*Conversations with James*'.

He is a member of the Advisory Committee of the Bertrand Russell Tribunal.

The investigative work of Andre Vltchek appears in countless publications worldwide.

Andre Vltchek has produced and directed several documentary films for the left-wing South American television network teleSUR. They deal with diverse topics, from Turkey/Syria to Okinawa, Kenya, Egypt and Indonesia, but all expose the effects of Western imperialism on the Planet. His feature documentary film '*Rwanda Gambit*' has been broadcasted by Press TV, and aims at reversing the official narrative on the 1994 genocide, as well as exposing the Rwandan and Ugandan plunder of DR Congo on behalf of Western imperialism. He produced the feature length documentary film about the Indonesian massacres of 1965 in '*Terlena – Breaking of The Nation* ', as well as in his film about the brutal Somali refugee camp, Dadaab, in Kenya: '*One Flew Over Dadaab*'. His Japanese crew filmed his lengthy discussion with Noam Chomsky on the state of the world, which is presently being made into a film.

He frequently speaks at revolutionary meetings, as well as at the principal universities worldwide.

He presently lives in Asia and the Middle East.

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